LEFT BEHIND?
WORKING-CLASS MEN IN RURAL AMERICA

by
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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, precarity and insecurity have increased for many workers. However, a constellation of recent events—most centrally the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States—has brought attention to a particular group of workers: white, working-class men in rural America. This dissertation joins a large body of sociological literature in exploring the lives of working-class men, although with a focus on rural place. Based upon life history interviews with 61 working-class men from northwestern Pennsylvania, I investigate the state of working-class men in rural America today.

First, I explore the declining labor force participation rate among prime-age, working-class men, which is near its lowest point on record. While virtually all the men in this study were in the labor force at the time of the interview, a closer examination of their lifetime labor force histories show a pattern of what I term *chronic churning*, in which men leave the labor force for extended periods but almost always return and often persist in formal employment.

Second, I explore how men do—and do not—seek to improve their labor market prospects in three domains: upskilling, geographic mobility, and occupational flexibility. I find that men are often doing more to improve their labor market position than existing accounts allow.

Third, I examine these men's jobs, both the "good jobs" that pay at least $15 an hour and the jobs that pay less. The good jobs are mostly in traditional, blue-collar occupations and industries; often unionized; and sometimes professional or managerial. Dynamics of the low*er*-wage labor market include lateral moves among comparable jobs,

few clear-line paths of wage improvement, and wages that stagnate between $10 and $15 an hour.

Fourth, I explore how working-class men craft their identities in a labor market where jobs are often unfulfilling, poorly-paid, and precarious. I find that men ask both *more* and *less* of work, which both reflect less attachment to one's job. They ask *more* in the sense that men care about the nature of their work and are less willing to countenance work that is not personally fulfilling or at least tolerable, especially if poorly paid. Men ask *less* of work in the sense that many men have deemphasized the role of work in their identities. Men have what I call *vocational selves*, in which they find meaning and fulfillment in non-work pursuits. I also find a unique contentment among these men that I attribute to a set of subcultural beliefs and practices grounded in rural masculinity. These beliefs provide a sense of stability but also constrain how men approach work.

Finally, I explore the political implications of the current state of working-class men. Regarding the 2016 election, most men were reluctant about Trump but saw Clinton as even less acceptable. Men have grievances that are more in line with political but not economic populism, yet I suggest that the deep stories of the political right and left can be united over a shared concern with the way institutional power infringes on personal liberty.

Dissertation Committee

Sociology Faculty: Andrew J. Cherlin, Kathryn Edin, Meredith Greif

Outside Faculty: Robert Lieberman (CHAIR), Daniel Schlozman

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All projects are personal, but some are more personal than others. The formal beginning of this project can be traced back to my applications to doctoral programs, when I used my personal statement to ask, “How are workers today, especially those with limited educations, faring in their quest for dignified work with decent pay?” In particular, I wrote that I was interested in exploring this question among low-income men living in small towns and rural communities. As it happened, that is largely what this dissertation is about.

But the true origins of this project go all the way back to my upbringing in rural Pennsylvania, which is perhaps why this topic was not easily abandoned. As the product of a low-income, working-class family in rural America, I have always been aware of social class, even when I did not have the language for it. I saw how my Dad worked hard but failed to get ahead, and visits back home over the years have always left me curious about how those who live there make a living. This dissertation, at least in part, is my attempt to find out.

My decision to apply to Johns Hopkins was born at the ASA Annual Meeting in New York City in 2013. Having long equivocated about going back to school, I finally committed to the process and used the ASA meeting to reacquaint myself with Sociology and steal time with scholars I hoped to work with. I approached Kathy Edin (then at Harvard) after a session and delivered—probably in a fog—my elevator pitch. Given my interests, she said, I should look at the work of Andy Cherlin at Johns Hopkins. And by the way, she added, she and her husband Tim would soon be leaving Harvard for Hopkins as well. I still applied widely to programs, but Hopkins always had the pole

position. In fact, during a campus visit at another program, I shared in a one-on-one faculty meeting that one of my options was working with Kathy at Hopkins, to which that scholar replied, “Definitely go to Hopkins.” I have never for a moment regretted the decision to attend Hopkins, thanks in large part to the mentorship of Kathy and Andy, who have been every bit as supportive as I could have hoped when I first approached Kathy at ASA.

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While still at LSA, I remember Cynthia once telling me something about her husband being a well-known sociologist. Who knew then that years later you'd end up advising my dissertation?

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Meredith Greif and Julia Burdick-Will joined the Hopkins faculty right around the time I arrived, and they were both regular participants in our weekly PIRL lunches. They both had ample opportunity to comment on my work in various stages of disarray, and I thank them for their insight, prodding, and patience. And thanks to Meredith for the syllabus to her housing and homelessness class, a version of which I hope to teach someday, and for her role on my dissertation committee.

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I am grateful to all the Hopkins faculty with whom I've interacted, in ways big and small: Rina, Emily, Joel, Ryan, Lingxin, Ho-Fung, Mike, Katrina, Steve, and Beverly. I look forward to continuing as colleagues. Special thanks to Karl Alexander, Professor Emeritus but Department Chair when I applied, for his kindness and hospitality on my visit that helped convince me Hopkins was for me.

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The topic of this dissertation grows directly from my family biography, which starts with my Mom. Thanks goes to her—while she still might not know exactly what I

do, she has always supported me over the years. Her role was more than just moral support—she played an integral role in making this happen by switching places with me for weeks at a time so I could do fieldwork and not leave my wife completely on her own. At least it gave you all that time with your grandson! I only wish my Dad were here to read these words, but I take comfort knowing he'd be proud. His four kids have two PhD's, four master's, and four bachelor's degrees among them—not bad for being "just" a high school graduate.

For Holden, it's crazy to think you were born the January before I started at Hopkins, and now you're on the verge of kindergarten. Virtually your whole life to this point has been lived with me working on this single project. Your Mom and I will always remember when you once told us, "Mom goes to work; Dad goes to coffee shops." I look forward to the days when you're old enough to better understand what Dad was doing all those hours in coffee shops and libraries and trips back up in Pennsylvania. You have always been fascinated with manual labor, which strikes a chord with this project. As of this writing, you still love construction and want to be a builder at a time when many of your peers have moved on to super heroes and Star Wars. One of my biggest regrets is that you'll never get to woodwork with Grandpa Gary, but maybe I can suffice as a stand-in someday. It's ironic that my own opportunity to transcend my working-class roots through education means you'll be one step removed from them. I hope you will always see the value of those who build, drive, repair, serve, and make, whatever you decide to do. I love you.

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For Dad, who showed me the dignity of work,

and for Holden, who should be whatever he wants

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

A constellation of events over the past few years—including the methamphetamine and opioid crises (Rigg and Monnat 2015; Rigg, Monnat, and Chavez 2018); the rise in so-called "deaths of despair" among non-Hispanics whites (Case and Deaton 2017; Monnat and Brown 2017); and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States (Francis 2018; Monnat 2016)—have brought national attention to a group previously overlooked: rural, working-class men. While working-class men of all stripes face labor market challenges, rural men lag behind their urban counterparts in several key employment indicators, including labor force participation and employment (Jensen and Jensen 2011). Despite recent gains in manufacturing employment, the reality is that the peak years of the U.S. industrial plant are so far in the past that a whole generation of young men has come of age for whom there was never a promise of a secure, well-paying life on the line.[1] Anthropologist Kathryn Dudley wrote in 1994 that the closure of a plant might be the closest thing America has to a national ritual to mark the slow death of the days when a full-time, blue-collar job was a path to the middle class for less-educated workers (Dudley 1994). A man born in 1988—the year the Chrysler plant closed in Kenosha, Wisconsin, about which Dudley was writing—would be in his early thirties today. The virtue of work has long been part of the American ethos (Ellwood 1988), and the ability to provide for one's family has long been linked to working class-masculinity (Cherlin 2014; Lamont 2000; Sherman 2009). Yet what are

1 While US manufacturing in 2018 had its largest job gain in 20 years (Franck 2019), manufacturing still makes up just 8.5% of US employment, down from 30% in 1950 (Kotkin 2018).

men to do in a world where the availability of manual occupations that provide stable work with good wages are in short supply?

One answer to this question seems to be that some men are eschewing work altogether. The labor force participation rate[2]—those who are working or actively seeking work—among prime-age men (ages 25-54) has dropped from 98 percent in the mid-1950s to 89.5 in March of 2019. This decrease in labor force participation has been greater among the so-called working class—those with less than a four-year college degree—who are less likely than their college-educated peers to be in the labor market (Council of Economic Advisors 2016; Eberstadt 2016). By one estimate, there are 10 million prime-age men "missing" from the labor force today who would be working if work rates had held at year 2000 levels (Eberstadt 2016). Yet while this phenomenon is well-documented, less is known about why men are choosing to leave the labor force, especially for extended periods of time. Even if it turns out that some of these men working in less traditional ways (Sugie 2018), that still represents a significant departure from the behaviors of working-class men from past generations, the implications of which should be more fully understood.

This dissertation, "Left Behind? Working-Class Men in Rural America", explores the labor force expectations and experiences of this younger generation of working-class men, including the decision of some to leave the labor force entirely. Using in-depth interviews with 61 younger, working-class men from rural Pennsylvania, I explore how men seek, find, keep, and lose work in the twenty-first century. Yet while this project has

2 This measure will be further explained later in the Introduction and also in Chapter 2.

a singular focus on younger, working-class men in rural America, there is also great diversity within these cases, which allow for contrasts and comparisons. The men in this study represent occupational heterogeneity, everything from law enforcement officers to drug dealers, teachers to truck drivers, contractors to direct care staff. These 61 men have worked in dozens of occupations and hundreds of jobs collectively over their lives, allowing important insight into the diverse trajectories and outcomes across these cases. There is also diversity in the work status of these men: there are those who have always worked, and those with significant gaps in employment, including some men currently out of the labor force. This diversity of occupations and work statuses allows an exploration—not just of those who have struggled—but those who have managed to do well. There is also a diversity of family structures among the men in this study, which sets it apart from recent work only concerned with men who have children (Cooper 2014; Edin and Nelson 2013; Pugh 2015). Among the men in this study are many who are single and childless, some who are married with children, and many who have more complex family situations that include blended families, multiple partner fertility, and various arrangements with custodial and noncustodial children.

Work is a central aspect of life, a primary source of meaning, and an obvious means of support, so understanding the work lives—including the decision to leave the formal labor force—of working-class men is of utmost consequence. And given the changing nature of work and the likelihood of even greater disruption of the working classes due to automation and other forces (Autor, Katz, and Kearney 2006), understanding the labor force experience, including the decision to leave the work force entirely, is of utmost importance, especially among groups that are already at a

significant disadvantage in the transforming economy. With this dissertation, I hope to shed light on one corner of the twenty-first century labor market—that of younger, working-class men in rural America. In so doing, I hope to spur future scholarship of work and nonwork among the various populations and communities, which is imperative for the nation's economic future and any attempts to address questions of poverty, inequality, work, and community.

Research Objectives

This dissertation has five main research objectives:

1. Examine why rural men leave the labor force, especially when they exit for extended periods of time, and explore the dynamics of these spells of labor force nonparticipation;

2. In light of a labor market with decreased opportunities for secure, good-paying jobs for those with less than a four-year college degree, explore how rural men do—and do not—seek to improve their labor market prospects;

3. Examine the pathways to good jobs in rural America for the men who have them, and conversely, identify barriers men face in obtaining these good jobs;

4. Explore how rural, working-class men craft their identities in a labor market where jobs are often unfulfilling, poorly-paid, and precarious; and

5. Explore the political implications of the current state of rural, working-class men, especially in light of the attention given to this population in the wake of the 2016 presidential election.

The first objective concerns the declining labor force participation among less-educated men. Labor force surveys give men some opportunity to specify why they are not working, but survey questions present constrained choice sets with no opportunity for elaboration or narrative. Surveys are also sometimes unreliable, especially for poor and hard-to-reach populations (Edin and Lein 1997). This study, by using semi-structured interviews with a focus on full-life employment histories, allows me to probe for periods of labor force exit and set those periods in fuller context, allowing us to see the "whole story", the rich interplay of factors surveys are not suited to capture. The second objective concerns what men in the study did to improve their labor market prospects. While the employment landscape for working-class men is challenging, the men still have volition and can make even constrained choices to improve their labor market chances. In particular, do men seek additional skills and training, show a willingness to move to an area with more or better jobs, or consider nontraditional employment, including taking jobs in traditionally female-dominated occupations? The third objective capitalizes on the heterogeneity of the cases in this study by focusing on those men—about one-quarter of the sample—who have managed to secure good jobs. What are the common themes among the men who make at least $15 an hour? Conversely, what are the barriers and constraints men face who have yet to acquire a good job? The fourth objective explores how men craft their identities in this new world of work. The bargain struck by the fathers and grandfathers of many of these men—difficult and unrewarding work in exchange for job security, familial authority, and middle-class consumption—has broken down. How have men responded? Finally, the fifth objective takes up the question I am most often asked when I mention I study white, working-class men in rural America:

what are the politics of a group perceived to be part of the President Trump's core support?

Data and Methods

Cases

Data for this dissertation come from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 61 working-class men in rural Pennsylvania conducted between July 2016 and May 2018. The three screening criteria for inclusion in the sample were as follows: 1) men; 2) relatively young, generally under 40 years old; and 3) working class, loosely defined as having less than a four-year college degree, working in a blue-collar occupation, or both. The demographics of the cases are displayed in Table 1. The average age of the participants is 35. All participants are men, and virtually all are white. The modal highest educational attainment is a high school diploma or GED, although a plurality of the men had attempted or completed some type of post-secondary education or training. About three-quarters of the men had a job at the time of the interview, while another ten percent were unemployed but looking for work. Ten men were not in the labor force. Within the screening frame, I sought to maximize the heterogeneity of occupations (for more on maximum heterogeneity in sampling, see Edin and Lein 1997). As will become clear throughout the dissertation, the men work in a wide range of sectors, including construction, manufacturing, retail, health care, and law enforcement. Below I give additional background about the reasons for each of the three primary screening criteria, as well as a word about race.

Table 1.1: Demographics of Cases

Characteristics	Total ($N = 61$)	Percent[a]
Mean Respondent Age	35	N/A
Gender		
Male	61	100
Female	0	0
Race		
White	58	95
American Indian	2	3
Asian American	1	2
Highest Educational Attainment		
Less than high school	1	2
High school diploma or equivalent (e.g. GED)	20	33
Completed post-secondary credential (e.g. CDL)	11	18
Some college, no degree	15	25
Associate degree	7	11
Bachelor's degree	7	11
Work Status (at time of interview)		
Full-time	35	57
Part-time	11	18
Unemployed	5	8
Not in labor force (NILF)	10	16

[a] May not total to 100 due to rounding

Gender

This dissertation is primarily concerned with the experiences of men, which connects it to a large body of sociological literature that has explored the lives of working-class men. Early treatments focused on blue-collar occupations and told of life on the shop floor and the repetitive and demanding work it entailed (Burawoy 1982;

Halle 1984; Komarovsky 1964; Rubin 1976). Another wave of literature—mostly in the 1980s and 1990s but continuing to the present—tells of the disappearance of those good-paying, secure factory or mill jobs (Alexander 2017; Chen 2015; Dudley 1994; Goldstein 2018; Linkon and Russo 2002; Milkman 1997; Sherman 2009). These works include ethnographic profiles of plant closures, interviews with displaced workers, and accounts of company towns dealing with the loss of their dominant employers. Themes of precarity and insecurity dominate sociological treatments of work in the twenty-first century (Cooper 2014; Kalleberg 2011; Pugh 2015; Silva 2013), which depict families and individuals of all social classes as unmoored, navigating a world where virtually everything is in flux and largely out of their control. And recent work has highlighted the tenuous attachments of working-class men to the institutions of work, family, and religion (Edin et al. 2019).

The low-wage labor market in the United States has fundamentally changed over the past several decades, and less-educated men have been particularly affected. Skill-biased technological change (Autor, Katz, and Kearney 2008; Goldin and Katz 1998a) and other forces have reduced demand for certain types of less-skilled labor, the economy has transitioned from manufacturing to services, and the labor market has polarized between good and bad jobs (Kalleberg 2011). Manufacturing and production, which have traditionally been a source of good-paying jobs for less-educated men, have lost jobs in recent decades (Acemoglu et al. 2016; Autor et al. 2014; Kalleberg 2011; Morris and Western 1999; Osterman 2014; Pierce and Schott 2016), while lower-paying jobs in the service sector have proliferated (Autor and Dorn 2013). The United States lost 30 percent of its manufacturing jobs between 1998 and 2016 (Bhattarai 2016), and more than 80

percent of all private jobs are now in the service sector (Casselman 2016). The result is a relative decrease in secure, semi-skilled, middle-income jobs (Bresnahan, Brynjolfsson, and Hitt 2002; Freeman and Katz 2007; Katz and Murphy 1992; Krueger 1993; Levy and Murnane 1992; Tüzemen and Willis 2013; Wright and Dwyer 2003). Additionally, the labor force participation rate among prime-age men (ages 25-54) has dropped, a decrease particularly acute among the working class.[3] Chronic nonparticipation—defined as periods outside the labor force of one year or longer—make up most of these cases. In 2015, two-thirds of prime-age men who were out of the labor force were absent for the entire year (Eberstadt 2016). In fact, almost one-quarter of working-class men between the ages of 21 and 30 report not working at all during 2015, up from just 9 percent in 2000 (Aguiar et al. 2017).

Age

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) defines prime working-age as those between the ages of 25 and 54, the years during which one is least likely to be in school or retired, two of the primary reasons why those over age 16 are not in the labor force. In short, it is expected that most men between these ages will be working or actively looking for work. However, the BLS definition of prime working-age is still quite wide, encompassing multiple generations and different types of cases as one moves up the age distribution. For example, the reasons for nonwork are likely different for men who are 54-years old and 34-years old. The latter is much more likely to have underage

3 There will be more about the labor force participation rate for men and women in Chapter 2.

dependents, hence an ostensible reason to work (or at least need to pay child support). The younger man is also more likely to be in better health and less likely to be on medical disability. The younger cohort is also less likely to have grown up with the realistic hope of secure, good-paying work available with a high school diploma, making an examination of their approach to the labor market likely different than an older generation who still had hope of such employment. This project limits respondent ages to roughly the younger half of the prime-age range, or from about 25 to 45. Focusing on men under age 45 narrows the scope of the inquiry to men for whom nonwork is least likely to be for expected reasons like disability or the loss of once-secure manufacturing work. It also allows a more unified story of the causes and consequences on nonwork than one would get were the study to include those at the upper limits of the prime-age category.

Working Class

The meaning of working-class is contested, but it is often operationalized in sociological research as those with less than a four-year college degree. This definition is based upon a well-established literature that finds that educational attainment, particularly the divide between those who complete a bachelor's degree and those who do not, is a salient arbiter of social class (Massey 2007; Putnam 2016) and a primary cleavage for divergences in resources for children (McLanahan 2004) and family structure (Cherlin 2014). During the recruitment process for this dissertation, I operated with a more inclusive definition of working class that also includes occupation. Several men in the study have four-year degrees but work in working-class jobs. Additionally,

some men who have a four-year degree earned it in a nontraditional way, such as by using the GI Bill after serving in the military. Still a third definition of working-class is parental education (having a mother or father—or both—with no college or less than a four-year degree), which is the criterion used by (Silva 2013) in her study of 100 working-class young adults. By this measure, all cases in this study would be working class except one. Overall, the men in this study are all safely working class by one definition or another. They are also working-class according to the intuition of the researcher in the more subjective sense that one knows working class when one sees it.

Race

There was no racial screen for inclusion in the study, but because the non-institutional population of the study area is virtually all white, the cases in the study are also virtually all white. Of the 61 men, 58 identify as white, two as Native American, and one as Asian American. The two participants who identify as Native American presented as white to the researcher, but they revealed their native ancestry during the interview. The data provided were valuable for the study, so I opted to include both interviews in the analysis. When asked how they identified, both opted to be identified as Native American for the study.

Setting

The setting of this study is a largely rural region of northwestern Pennsylvania that is well-suited to explore declining labor force participation and the working class. Considered frontier land in the early years of the United States, northwestern

Pennsylvania experienced increasing European settlement and conquest—and Indian resistance—in the decades before and after the American Revolution. Many of the villages and towns in northwestern Pennsylvania today began as planned settlements, outposts for timber and trading companies, or military forts. The incorporation dates of many of these towns—1788, 1796, 1800, 1825—reveal the timing of the wave of white, colonial settlement that pushed the native tribes further west, most of whom eventually ended up on reservations in Oklahoma. Indigenous populations were replaced with Europeans primarily of English, Irish, and German descent. Today, the demographics of this region look remarkably similar: outside of the urban centers of Erie and Pittsburgh, the non-institutional population remains at least 95 percent white, largely untouched by the Second Great Migration of African Americans or other waves of non-white migration that have changed the complexion of other parts of rural America (Carr, Lichter, and Kefalas 2012). The area is bounded in the west by Ohio and in the north by Lake Erie and New York State.

Northwestern Pennsylvania has a long history of a diversified, industrial economy.[4] The world's first commercially successful oil well was drilled in this area in 1859 (Dickey 1959), and the region was long a national and even international hub for oil extraction, refinement, and distribution. The oil companies Pennzoil and Quaker State were both once headquartered here, and the region was also home to many midsized manufacturers, such as Cytemp Specialty Steel in Crawford County, which once

4 According to the US Department of Agriculture County Types (see https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/county-typology-codes/descriptions-and-maps/), most of the counties in this area are nonspecialized, meaning they do not meet the criteria to be designated as dependent on farming, mining, manufacturing, recreation, or government.

employed over 1,000 people. The region produces iron, lumber, and agriculture, yet it has suffered in much the same way as many former manufacturing and extraction centers: Pennzoil and Quaker State relocated to Texas, and Cytemp closed its doors in the 1990s like many plants of its kind. The counties of this area have below average rates of college attainment and labor force participation and above average rates of disability and poverty. And while the cost of living is low, these areas have above average poverty rates and below average median household and per capita incomes. Yet many smalltime manufacturers remain, as do vestiges of agriculture production and the oil and lumber industries. The area has several hospitals and medical centers; a few colleges and universities, as well as a number of technical training schools; local governments and school systems; and an array of big box stores, small scale retailers, and fast food restaurants. The unemployment rates of these counties are only slightly higher than the national rate.

Recruitment

The original goal of this study was a purposive sample of 60 younger, working-class men through a mixture of snowball sampling and venue-based recruitment. I began by making visits to the area and speaking with key informants and local organizations, some of whom I already knew by virtue of my roots in the area[5], some of whom were new to me. When recruiting, I most often said I was looking for younger men who were not working or had trouble finding work, but I did not exclude men who were working at

5 More on my ties to the area is later in Chapter 1.

the time of the interview to guard against sampling on the dependent variable, namely nonwork. In hindsight, the decision not to use employment status as a screen for the study was prescient, since as will be discussed in the findings, nonwork was part of the employment histories of many men, even those who showed strong labor force attachment overall. Informants provided referrals of men to interview and ideas of places where the men may gather. In some cases, the informants themselves qualified for the study and were included. Some informants were contacted in person, while others were initially contacted on Facebook in cases where I already had a relationship with the informant. Key informants and study participants were all asked if they know others who meet the study criteria. In the pilot phase of the project, this sampling procedure resulted in interviews with 28 men, which established the viability of the strategy for the full dissertation. About halfway through the study, I created recruitment materials to leave at local businesses and social service agencies, as well as recruitment blurbs that were used on social media. However, just a few men opted into the study through those means, a sign that the financial incentive alone was not enough to draw interest and that most men required a personal connection or referral to be persuaded to participate. The latter is not surprising, given the generally closed nature of some small towns and rural areas. Finally, part of recruitment meant me being out and about in public space. I talked with local business owners, nonprofit executives, chambers of commerce, pastors, and educators. I spent time in bars, restaurants, coffee shops, and businesses, all with an eye to possible study participants. Some eventual participants were recruited from this networking and from spending time in these venues.

Interviewing

Once respondents were identified and successfully recruited for the study, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews with each respondent using what has been called narrative interviewing (see DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016). I began each interview with the invitation for the man to tell me the story of his life. From there, participants were asked about their life histories, including origins, education, employment, relationships, and current situation. Special attention was given to participants' employment histories, including job duties, duration, hours, wages and benefits, coworkers and supervisors, reasons for leaving, views toward work and the labor market, and current work status and means of support. The interview guide is included as Appendix A.

Interviews took place in a variety of places: homes, apartments, front yards, back yards, offices, coffee shops, restaurants, and even the interview room at a police station. Men came from a total of 17 different towns across a five-county area of northwestern Pennsylvania. Originally, the local United Way agreed to screen its caseload to look for qualifying men, but ultimately, no interviews were produced. At the conclusion of each interview, the respondent was given the option to be re-contacted, including through social media, so that his situation could be tracked over time. Interviews were digitally recorded, and I took field notes about the setting and substance of each interview as soon as possible after the interview was completed. Respondents were offered $25 for their time, although in many cases, men initially refused payment until I clarified that the money was not my own. Even then, a few men refused payment. Approval for project was secured from the Johns Hopkins University Institutional Review Board (IRB), and

IRB approved of any changes or additions to the research design. Finally, although this is an interview-based dissertation and not an ethnography or community study, I did more than conduct interviews in an attempt to strengthen ties with the area and with respondents: I attended churches; ate or drank at numerous restaurants, bars, and coffee shops; and attended community events, including a candlelight vigil on Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, a talent show, an Eagle Scout ceremony, a community theater production, and even a funeral.

Coding

The recorded interviews were transcribed, assigned uniform names that included a case number and pseudonym,[6] and uploaded into NVivo 12 Plus, a software program for analysis of qualitative data. Following the protocol detailed by Deterding and Waters (2018), I began analysis by creating a set of index codes, which are broad categories based upon the topics covered in the interview protocol. Index codes are meant to capture major themes within the interview, such as Education, Employment History, and Military.[7] There were 32 initial index codes based on the interview guide, and I added an additional nine codes during the coding process to capture topics that emerged within the

6 Case numbers were assigned in chronological order of the date of the interview, so the first interview conducted is 001, the second is 002, and so on. Pseudonyms were assigned by the researcher using the Social Security Administration's (SSA) list of the most popular baby names of the 1980s (https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/decades/names1980s.html) because the average age of the men in the study is 35, making the average birth year for this cohort 1982. Before assigning names, I eliminated any names in the SSA's list that were the real names of men in the study, plus any typically non-Caucasian names to reflect the fact that the study population is 95% white. I then assigned names to the cases, beginning with the first case and assigning the first eligible name from the SSA list.

7 As Deterding and Waters (2018) discuss, this approach, which they call flexible coding, is virtually the opposite of the grounded theory approach, in which there are no predetermined codes and each line of an interview transcript is assigned a code, thus building the coding schema from the ground up.

interviews for which there were not adequate codes. During the initial coding, any section of the transcript that applied to a given code was assigned to that code in NVivo 12 Plus[8]; some sections of the transcript were assigned to multiple codes, and I made effort to ensure that all parts of each transcript were assigned to at least one code. Concurrent with this index coding, I populated a spreadsheet with what Deterding and Waters (2018) call attributive codes, which are categorical or numeric data connected to each case, such as number of biological children, highest educational attainment, and current hourly wage. Also concurrent with the index coding, I took notes on each case, which formed the basis for a Respondent Memo associated with each case. Each case also has a set of Interview Field Notes, which was my attempt to capture—in most cases immediately after the interview— as much detail as possible from the interview, including the substance of the conversation, as well as key details about the interview setting and respondent's attire and demeanor. These four documents—the interview transcript, respondent memo, interview field notes, and spreadsheet of attributive codes—make up the core data for each case. Additionally, during coding I also created a Cross-Case Memo, which identified common themes across cases for later exploration and verification using the case files.

Excluding Cases

I conducted 62 interviews for this project but chose to exclude one case from the analysis due to concerns about the veracity of the respondent. This was not a decision made lightly, both because all data are valuable and because I did not want the exclusion

8 In NVivo, these codes are technically called "nodes".

of a case to alter any conclusions drawn from the cases.[9] Even in the interview itself, there were numerous claims made by the respondent that seemed incredulous in the moment, and to the degree I could, I sought clarification in the interview itself. Upon reviewing the interview transcript, many of the same concerns emerged about details both large and small. To the degree possible, I sought to verify claims independently and found reason to doubt key claims. I decided against re-contacting the respondent to verify claims for two reasons. First, I did not think it worthwhile to challenge the respondent's veracity directly at risk to that relationship and relationship to others in the field. Second, it was my judgement that the interview was shot through with exaggeration and hyperbole, if not outright falsehoods; the quibble was not with one or two key details. This fact-checking, combined with my own researcher's intuition and common sense, lead to the decision to exclude the case completely.

Additionally, an early phase of the project included five interviews with local employers. The hope with including employer interviews was to capture both sides of the employment relationship, in keeping with Desmond's argument that many exploitative arrangements are relational (Desmond 2016). It was my determination that those early interviews were not useful, especially given the tendency for employers to find fault with employees and not with themselves. It was unlikely that employers themselves would admit to substandard pay or working conditions, and the amount I could glean about the area was minimal. Since I could not independently observe the hiring process, I decided to abandon the employer portion of the study, and I did not use data from the employer

9 This latter concern is less applicable in this study because it is a non-random sample.

interviews in this dissertation. Future research may attempt to capture the employer perspective of the employment relationship.

Confidentiality Considerations

In the strictest sense, this dissertation is an interview-based study. But there is another way in which it is much more than that, as I was born and raised in northwestern Pennsylvania, and it is where much of my family still lives. In his study of the boarding school he attended, Shamus Khan (2010) realized partway through his fieldwork that attempts to conceal the school's identity, which was his initial plan, would prove impossible given his connections to the school that would emerge in the writing of the project. That is true here, although the reason for revealing my connection to this place goes much deeper. Although not an ethnography in the strictest sense, the interviews for this dissertation sit on a foundation of two decades of lived experience in northwestern Pennsylvania. For my first eighteen years, northwestern Pennsylvania was the only home I knew, never living elsewhere and rarely traveling far from home. In the years since high school, I lived in the area one summer during college and another summer in my early twenties. I have made countless visits to see family and friends.

Initially, the decision to choose northwestern Pennsylvania was one of convenience. In the Johns Hopkins program, by the fourth year each doctoral student is required to complete a Trial Research Paper, which is a journal-length piece of original research. I knew I wanted to study declining labor force participation among working-class men in rural America, but living outside Washington, DC and going to school in nearby Baltimore, there were no rural places nearby. Given my familiarity with the area,

it made practical sense to use my hometown as the basis for my Trial Research Paper. Further, with limited research funds, I could stay for free with family and use my mother's car for fieldwork.[10] There was also the sense that being known to those in the area brought credibility. Seth, one of the participants in the study who I did not know personally, confirmed as much during my interview with him:

> … and when I saw your picture I remembered you. Because it's… small town football games and stuff like that. Like, I remember him. And so, like I said, it took me a hot minute to think about it, and then I messaged you and I thought, "You know, if he's writing a paper for something, as a guy who struggled in high school, sick, and it took me a long way to get where I am. I mean it really, really did. Or I would probably still be, I mean I got, there's guys I went to school with, they are still piling lumber and making 12 bucks and eight bucks an hour, you know. Just scraping by every day.

My Trial Research Paper was based upon the first 28 of these interviews, and at that point, it made the most sense to add cases in the original field site rather than start anew elsewhere.

One methodological dilemma has been whether to reveal my relationships with the field site and some of the respondents. There has been a recent move toward more transparency in ethnographic research[11], I agree with Jerolmack and Murphy (2017) and other advocates of greater transparency that unmasking of place adds greatly to the sense of trust. Identifiers like "Northern City" or "Pleasant Valley" are unhelpfully unmoored from actual social, physical, and cultural context. However, research in rural setting raises unique confidentiality and transparency concerns. Many national datasets suppress individual records for low-population counties to protect confidentiality, so what does

10 Partway through the project, my wife and I bought a second car in part to make future fieldwork, including travel to and from northwestern Pennsylvania, possible.
11 For a helpful overview of this discussion, see Contreras (2019).

that mean for qualitative researchers who want to study those places? But even with these risks, the demographics and economies of rural places vary greatly, and it matters whether the work was done in farm country, coal country, oil country, mining country, a new immigrant destination, or a magnet for amenity tourism. Anonymizing place is one option, but that can create issues in cases like this dissertation where the researcher feels compelled to disclose a personal connection to the place as a matter of transparency. My solution for this dissertation is to specify a *region* that includes several counties and dozens of towns, boroughs, and villages. This degree of masking the field site—partial but not total—allows a sense of "real-ness" while still guaranteeing anonymity to respondents in the eyes of the average reader of this work.

Another question about masking is, "Who is confidentiality for?" The default for qualitative research has long been to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality, but this is being questioned. Contreras (2019), who writes about confidentiality considerations in the context of studying violence and crime, offers suggestions for partial measures of confidentiality that enhance confidentiality but protect researcher and subject. He wrestles with the fact that place matters to his work, but on the other hand, he is dealing with subjects where confidentiality can be life or death matter. This dissertation, as a study of working-class men, does not rise to that level of sensitivity. While some men have engaged in deviant or even criminal activity, this is generally a study about legal activities and pursuits. Perhaps the most sensitive information disclosed in these interviews concerns wages and salaries, but the topics are generally mundane. I am not concerned that general readers of this dissertation will be able to identify respondents, but what if study participants or others from these towns read this work and recognize—or

think they recognize—one another? Is the confidentiality promised to respondents meant to shield them from general readers being able to figure out who they are, or does it also apply to other residents in the field site or even other respondents in the study? In a rural setting, because "everybody knows everybody," there is likely no degree of masking that can protect every identity without altering someone beyond recognition. This remains an open question.

Studying one's hometown area as a social scientist brings benefits and challenges. As many ethnographers have written, there is no objective place from which to study a people or a place. There is some chance that my familiarity with this place might make me less able to see certain things, which is why basing analysis on the interviews—for which there are transcripts—is important. Yet being a local also brings benefits, such as access that might be denied to outsiders. There were practical ways being familiar with the area was useful, even down to knowing how to get around the rural roads and find sometimes out-of-the-way places. I knew my way around the towns and back roads, had many relationships on which to draw, and had a sense of ease and comfort in a place that might have seemed quite foreign to an outsider. During the interviews and in reviewing the transcripts, my knowledge of the area's past and present made it easy to pick up on references to people, places, and things that an outsider would have missed or had to ask for clarity about. And I could set men's comments in the context of a knowledge of the field site earned over decades. Perhaps most importantly, northwestern Pennsylvania—and rural place more generally—is not exotic or strange to me; it does not confound me why people would live there or think the way they do, since I once lived there and likely shared similar values and beliefs.

Definitions

Labor Force Participation Rate[12]

The civilian non-institutional labor force participation rate (LFPR), which is captured in the Current Population Survey (CPS) and reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), is the percentage of the population age 16 and older who are not in prison, the active duty military, or other institutions (e.g. mental health facilities) and who are either currently *employed* or *unemployed* according to the BLS definitions. To be *employed*, one must have worked—whether fulltime or part-time—for pay or profit during the survey reference week. Also considered employed are any who were temporarily absent from their regular jobs because of illness, vacation, bad weather, a labor dispute, or various personal reasons, whether or not they were paid for the time off. The *unemployed* are those who did not have a job during the survey reference week, made at least one specific active effort to find a job during the prior 4 weeks, and were available for work (unless temporarily ill). Also considered unemployed are all those who were not working during the survey reference week but were waiting to be called back to a job from which they had been laid off. (In this case, they do not need to be actively looking for work to be classified as unemployed.) The employed and unemployed together constitute the labor force; in other words, the labor force level is the number of people who are either working or actively seeking work. All those who are neither

12 For more on how the government calculates various employment measures, see https://www.bls.gov/cps/cps_htgm.htm.

employed nor unemployed according to the above definitions are considered *not in the labor force* (NILF). There are many reasons why someone might not be in the labor force, such as retirement or staying home to care for children or others. Being in school is itself not a reason someone would be considered not in the labor force; what matters is one's work status. Therefore, a college student working part-time would be considered employed, and thus, in the labor force.

Disability Benefits[13]

The federal government administers several large programs that offer benefits to those considered disabled. The central program is the Social Security Disability Insurance program (often just "SSDI" or "DI"), which provided over $11 billion in benefits to over 10 million beneficiaries as of late 2014. SSDI pays benefits to workers over the age of 18 who have sufficient work history.[14] SSDI is administered by the Social Security Administration (SSA) and funded through the contributions of workers to the Social Security Trust Fund in the form of FICA Social Security taxes. The percentage of those in America receiving SSDI has increased significantly in recent decades, from 2.2 percent in the late 1970s to 3.5 percent in the years immediately preceding the 2007–2009 recession and 4.4 percent in 2013 (Liebman 2015).[15] Benefit levels are determined on a

13 Eberstadt (2016) provides a brief but helpful overview of the primary U.S. disability benefit programs. Also see the Social Security Administration's webpages about disability benefits (https://www.ssa.gov/benefits/disability/).
14 For more on how the government calculates whether a worker has enough "work credits" to qualify for SSDI, see https://www.disabilitysecrets.com/page10-13.html.
15 For a helpful summary of current SSDI trends, including debate about the drivers of increased receipt of SSDI, see Liebman (2015).

formula basis related to one's work history; most recipients receive between $800 and $1,800 per month, with the average benefit in 2019 being $1,234 monthly.

The two other largest programs are Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI), which in 2014 provided $4.4 billion to eight million individuals, and the Veterans Administration, which provided $4.5 billion to 3.5 million beneficiaries. Like SSDI, the SSI program is run by the Social Security Administration, but rather than based on work history, SSI is means-tested, meaning eligibility is based upon need. SSI pays benefits to disabled adults and children who have limited income and assets. SSI pays benefits from general fund taxes, not the Social Security Trust Fund. The monthly payment amount for SSI is based on the "federal benefit rate", which is $771 per month for individuals and $1,157 for couples in 2019.[16] The VA Disability Compensation program[17], administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, offers monthly payments to veterans who have illnesses or injuries as a result of military service (or in cases where military service exacerbated an existing condition). Veterans can qualify for benefits based upon both physical and mental health conditions developed before, during, or after service. Compensation rate is determined by a disability rating based on the severity of the disability. Finally, in addition to SSDI, SSI, and VA, there are some smaller disability programs at the federal level, as well as state-level workers' compensation programs.

16 There are certain deductions and supplements to these figures based on several factors. For more, see https://www.disabilitysecrets.com/question18.html.
17 For more information, see https://www.va.gov/disability/.

Unemployment Insurance[18]

The Federal-State Unemployment Insurance Program (often "UI") provides unemployment benefits to eligible workers who are unemployed through no fault of their own. Within federal guidelines, each state administers its own UI program, including eligibility requirements, benefit amounts, and the length of time benefits are available. In most states, the benefit is funded solely through a tax imposed on employers, although Pennsylvania is one of three states (along with New Jersey and Alaska) to require a minimal employee contribution. In 2014, the percentage of jobless workers receiving UI hit an all-time low of 26 percent, when 800,000 families used unemployment insurance (Stettner 2016). In Pennsylvania, qualifying for benefits is a three-step process that involves having enough wages and weeks of work to qualify (called "financial eligibility"); having a "qualifying separation" from employment, which cannot include quitting, being terminated for misconduct or failing a drug test, or a strike; and properly maintaining eligibility if approved, which involves filing biweekly claims, registering for employment search services within 30 days of applying for benefits, and actively searching for work.[19] According to the federal UI guidelines[20], benefits are generally based on a percentage of an individual's earnings over a recent 52-week period up to a state maximum amount. Benefits are paid for up to 26 weeks in most states, although

18 For more on UI, see the federal UI website at https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/unemployment-insurance. For more about unemployment compensation in the state of Pennsylvania, the site of this study, see https://www.uc.pa.gov/Pages/default.aspx.
19 For more information, see the Pennsylvania Unemployment Compensation Handbook at https://www.uc.pa.gov/unemployment-benefits/handbook/Pages/default.aspx. These are the current requirements for UC in Pennsylvania, but for some men in the study, they qualified for UC at times in the past when certain requirements may have differed.
20 See https://oui.doleta.gov/unemploy/uifactsheet.asp.

additional weeks of benefits may be available during times of high unemployment. Benefits are subject to federal income taxes and must be reported on one's federal income tax return.

Rural America

One approach to defining rural is place-based, grounded in a defined geography, often a census tract or county. As might be expected, there is no agreement about these measures, even within the United States government. The government measures rural in at least three different ways depending on the federal agency; the U.S. Census Bureau, the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS), and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) each have their own method. The first two of these agencies – the Census and ERS – use what Isserman (2005) calls a negative approach, meaning that rural is simply all that remains after the urban or the metropolitan is defined. However, each of these agencies has a different way of carving out those "desired" urban geographies. The Census, using a layered criteria to create census tracks, defines two types of urban areas: Urbanized Areas (UAs) of 50,000 or more people and Urban Clusters (UCs) of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. The remainder is "rural." The USDA ERS uses a county-based system and chooses to refer to rural counties as nonmetropolitan. For the USDA, nonmetropolitan areas include some combination of open countryside, rural towns (places with fewer than 2,500 people), and urban areas with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999 that are not part of larger labor market areas (metropolitan areas). Lastly, OMB also uses a county-based measure, but it divides the country into different statistical areas, which effectively combines urban and rural areas together based on

economic and social ties. A second approach to defining "rurality" is by its character rather than as a fact of geography. A helpful example of this in practice is Lichter and Brown (2011), who approach the rural through an examination of "symbolic and social boundaries—the distinctions between urban and rural communities and people and the processes by which boundaries are engaged" (2011: 565). They identify and discuss ten "common conceptions" (and in some cases misperceptions) of the rural: rural as cultural deposit box, backwater, engine of urbanization, exurbia, place of consumption, new immigrant destination, ghetto, food basket, repository of natural resources, and dumping ground. The focus on symbolic boundaries is a helpful reminder of what can be lost in more conventional geographical measurements.

Rural America accounts for seventy-five percent of America's land area and is home to over 50 million people. Contrary to narratives of uniform rural decline, the local economies in rural America are on diverse trajectories (Hamilton et al. 2008). Some rural places are thriving, buoyed by natural resources, tourism, or other geographic or economic advantages. Yet those thriving rural places notwithstanding, rural America faces stiff economic headwinds, even when compared to its urban counterparts. Rural America has experienced economic restructuring, demographic changes, and the increasing concentration of poverty (Burton et al. 2013), and the economic recovery after the Great Recession was slower in rural places (Kusmin 2014). The reasons for the changes in rural economies are not altogether different than the urban: "the protracted exhaustion of the Fordist era's structure of economic production, state intervention, and institutionalized social relationships; globalization; and pro-market neoliberalism" (Lobao 2014). Rural places have seen the change from an economy of production to one

of services (Slack 2014). And just like their urban counterparts, rural places have seen the effects of these economic changes on social institutions such as the family. In fact, many of the dynamics in the inner-city in which work fled to the suburbs (Wilson 1987, 1996) are also present in rural areas. Albrecht and Albrecht (2000) suggest that agricultural declines in rural America were met with limited manufacturing opportunities and the rise of the service sector, which is positively correlated to female employment, negatively to male employment, and inversely to sex ratio.

These economic changes drive changes to family structure. In fact, Snyder and McLaughlin (2004) find that family structure in nonmetropolitan areas has gradually come to look more like that in metro areas such that it is no longer accurate to think of rural families as more "traditional" than urban or suburban families. The rise of female-headed households and cohabitation cross-cut geography and are more likely to be influenced by other factors than rural-urban designation (Snyder and McLaughlin 2006). And just as people of means fled urban poverty for the suburbs, there has been a net outmigration from rural areas (Johnson and Lichter 2019), meaning that immigration might be the savior of rural America (Carr et al. 2012). Hispanics drove most of the rural population growth of the 2000s (Carr et al. 2012), although Hispanic migration was primarily to areas of agriculture and agribusiness, which is hardly uniform throughout rural America.

Outline of Chapters

The five remaining chapters of this dissertation match the research objectives outlined above. Chapter 2 concerns the declining labor force participation rate among

prime-age, working-class men, which is near its lowest point on record and has generated concern among scholars and policymakers. I examine why men leave the labor force, especially when they exit for extended periods of time, and explore the dynamics of these spells of labor force nonparticipation. Given the well-documented challenges men with less than college degree face in today's labor market, Chapter 3 explores how men do—and do not—seek to improve their labor market prospects. In particular, I focus on three primary ways men might attempt to improve their labor market position: 1) by upskilling, meaning getting additional education or training, thus making themselves more employable or more competitive for better jobs; 2) by geographic mobility, or moving to an area where jobs are more plentiful or of better quality, a tactic especially applicable for men living in rural areas with limited opportunities; and 3) by occupational flexibility, or taking jobs not traditionally done by men, such as in female-dominated occupations like care work. Almost one-third of the men in the study have job that pays an effective hourly rate of at least $15 an hour, and Chapter 4 examines the pathways to these "good jobs" for the men in the study who have them. This chapter also examines characteristics of the low-wage labor market for the majority of men in the study who have what I call bad(ish) jobs that pay less than $15 an hour, including the barriers men face in escaping bad(ish) jobs. Given the many changes in working-class work for men who have come of age in the twenty-first century, Chapter 5 explores how working-class men craft their identities in a labor market where jobs are often unfulfilling, poorly-paid, and precarious. Finally, any treatment of the white, working-class in 2019 must touch upon the implications for politics. Drawing upon conversations with these men about the 2016

election, which occurred early in the dissertation fieldwork, Chapter 6 explores the political implications of the current state of working-class men.

CHAPTER 2: MISSING MEN? REASSESSING HOW WE MEASURE, EXPLAIN, AND UNDERSTAND THE DECLINING LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE AMONG PRIME-AGE MEN

While the unemployment rate for men has been below 6 percent since late 2014, this obscures the fact that millions of men are not counted in this statistic because they are deemed to be not in the labor force, meaning they are not working or seeking work. The labor force participation rate among prime-age men (ages 25-54) has dropped from 98 percent in the mid-1950s to 89.5 in March of 2019. This decrease in labor force participation has been greater in rural areas (Jensen and Jensen 2011), and it is also greater among those with less than a four-year college degree (Council of Economic Advisors 2016; Eberstadt 2016). Additionally, chronic nonparticipation—defined as periods outside the labor force of one year or longer—make up most of these cases of nonwork. In 2015, two-thirds of prime-age men who were out of the labor force were absent for the entire year (Eberstadt 2016). In fact, almost one-quarter of men between the ages of 21 and 30 without a four-year college degree report not working at all during 2015, up from just 9 percent in 2000 (Aguiar et al. 2017).

Why are so many men dropping out of the labor force? Survey data reveals the existence of these nonparticipating men and suggests some about who they are and what they are doing, but there is not consensus on why these men are not working or seeking work. Explorations of this phenomenon, mostly by economists, tend to favor either supply-side or demand-side hypotheses. Supply-side explanations for nonwork argue that men have largely chosen to leave the labor force voluntarily, enticed by a combination of government benefits; financial and housing support from family and household members;

and the allure of video games and other leisure activities. Some supply-side proponents have also suggested that there is declining interest in work (Winship 2017) and a rising social acceptability of nonwork, a change from prior generations (Eberstadt 2016; Murray 2012). Demand-side explanations emphasize the role of structural changes to the economy, such as reduced demand for less-skilled labor, stagnant wages, globalization, and mismatches between the employment expectations of low-skilled men and the types of jobs that are available at their skill and educational levels. Cross-cutting these supply and demand explanations are what some have labeled institutional factors (Council of Economic Advisors 2016), such as the rise of mass incarceration and the burden of child support arrears. Recent evidence also suggests primary roles for poor health, pain, and addiction in labor force nonparticipation (Krueger 2017). In one recent review of the evidence, economists Abraham and Kearney (2018) attribute the decline in the male employment rate since 1999 as one-third demand-side and less than one-tenth supply-side, but much of the overall trend remains unexplained given available evidence (Abraham and Kearney 2018; Austin, Glaeser, and Summers 2018).

This chapter explores the "economic mystery" (Noguchi 2016) of declining labor force participation using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 61 working-class men from rural Pennsylvania. This qualitative examination is designed to inform findings from survey research and administrative records about declining labor force participation by setting labor force decisions within the context of men's lives, families, and communities. I will emphasize *chronic churning*, a phenomenon in which men leave the labor force for extended periods but almost always return and often persist in formal employment. While there is evidence of men moving in and out of the labor force in the

shorter term (Coglianese 2017), the discovery of chronic churning contributes a unique explanation of what may be driving increased rates of nonparticipation in the labor force. Among the men in this study, permanent labor force dropout was rare, but many men in the study left the labor force for extended periods of time. This finding suggests that even long bouts of nonparticipation are not permanent, and men who have such spells outside the labor force have not lost their desire to work. It also challenges the implicit notion that workers and nonworkers are relatively fixed categories that are stable over time and pushes back against analyses that have reified these survey categorizations of "worker" and "nonworker" into *de facto* social classes with qualitative commonalties. The picture that emerges in this study is that most men are working most of the time, but a closer examination of lifetime labor force narratives finds that periods of nonwork, including those lasting one year or more, are often "hidden" in plain sight within the histories of otherwise working men.

The question remains as to why men make these extended labor force exits of one year or more. A second contribution of this chapter is the ability, using the life histories of these men, to set these men's decisions to leave the labor force in context. I find that the four reasons men leave the labor force are 1) to pursue education or training; 2) struggles with substance abuse; 3) the receipt of disability benefits; and 4) what I term *elective nonparticipation*, which are periods of labor force dropout where men elect to leave the labor force for a time. Most elective nonparticipators show a relatively high degree of labor force attachment, and most often return to the formal labor force sooner or later. A final group of men, about ten percent of the total, are who I call *marginal men*, who have tenuous attachments to the labor force over time. These men tend to be

younger, unmarried, and childless, thus resembling the popular depiction of nonworking men, although the exact reasons why these men have forsaken formal work vary. In looking across all cases, one unexpected finding was the role that unemployment insurance (UI) plays as a livelihood strategy, a theme I explore at the end of the chapter. And while this chapter is devoted to the proximate reasons why men leave the labor force, these decisions occur in a broader labor market context that has few predictable ladders of advancement and where the financial rewards of work are limited, even for those men who remain attached to the labor force and show loyalty to a single employer. I explore this broader context in other chapters, along with the ways in which this context has changed the way working-class men approach work.

Literature Review

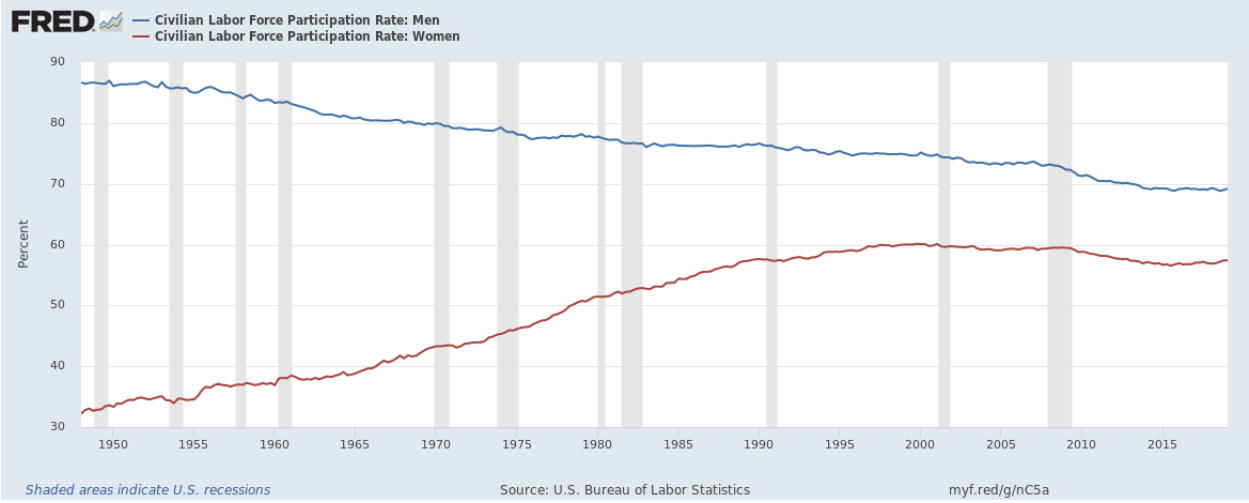
Trends in American Labor Force Participation[21]

The civilian non-institutional labor force participation rate (LFPR), which is captured in the Current Population Survey (CPS) and reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), is the percentage of the population age 16 and older who are not in prison, the active duty military, or other institutions (e.g. mental health facilities) and who are either currently employed or unemployed but actively seeking work. The American labor force participation rate has been marked by two dominant trends since the 1950s: a steady decline in labor force participation among men and a dramatic increase in labor force participation among women, especially since the 1970s (Council

21 For a helpful overview of this topic, see Council of Economic Advisers (2014).

of Economic Advisers 2014). Figure 1 shows the civilian labor force participation rate for men and women from January 1948 to January 2019. In January of 1948, 86.7 percent of men age 16 and over and 32.2 percent of women age 16 and over were in the labor force. However, over the second half of the twentieth century, men's labor force participation dropped by almost 12 percentage points, from 86.7 to 74.8, while women's labor force participation nearly doubled, going from 32.2 percent to 60.1 by 2000. Since 2000, men's labor force participation has continued to recede, dropping from 74.8 in 2000 to 69.2 percent in the first quarter of 2019. Meanwhile, women's labor force participation has also declined since its turn-of-the-millennium peak, dropping to 57.4 percent in 2019.

Figure 2.1: Civilian Labor Force Participation Rate, Men and Women, 1948-2019[22]



22 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Civilian Labor Force Participation Rate: Men [LNS11300001], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LNS11300001, April 13, 2019.

Scholars have sought to better understand these trends by parsing out the relative contributions to the declining labor force participation rate due to cyclical factors, like the ups and downs of the economy, and demographic factors, like the aging of the population (for examples, see Aaronson et al. 2014; Abraham and Kearney 2018; Juhn and Potter 2006; Moffitt, Davis, and Mas 2012). The year 2008 brought two additional shocks to the American labor force. First, the Great Recession saw the loss of millions of jobs, which sent the official unemployment rate into double digits and the U-6 unemployment rate[23] to almost 20 percent. Less noticed but equally important in terms of the labor force, 2008 was also the year that the first of the so-called Baby Boomers—those born starting in 1946—began to turn 62 and become eligible for early Social Security retirement benefits. The retirement of the Boomers begins a significant demographic shift of millions of workers from employment to retirement, thus removing many of them from the labor force. In the period from the final quarter of 2007 to the second quarter of 2014, the overall labor force participation rate fell from 65.9 percent to 62.8 percent, a decline of 3.1 percentage points. An analysis of this decline by the White House Council of Economic Advisers (2014) finds that about three-quarters of this decline in labor force participation from 2007 to 2014 was due to a combination of the aging of the population (the retirement of the Boomers) and the business cycle (the Great Recession and its aftermath), leaving about one-quarter of the decline not explained by demographic changes or cyclical factors. Among the factors at play in this "unexplained" quarter of the decline in labor force participation are the rise of automation, the role of disability

23 The U-6 unemployment rate is a more expansive measure of unemployment that includes two groups – marginally attached workers and involuntary part-time workers – who are not included in the standard unemployment rate that is popularly reported. For more, see https://www.bls.gov/lau/stalt.htm.

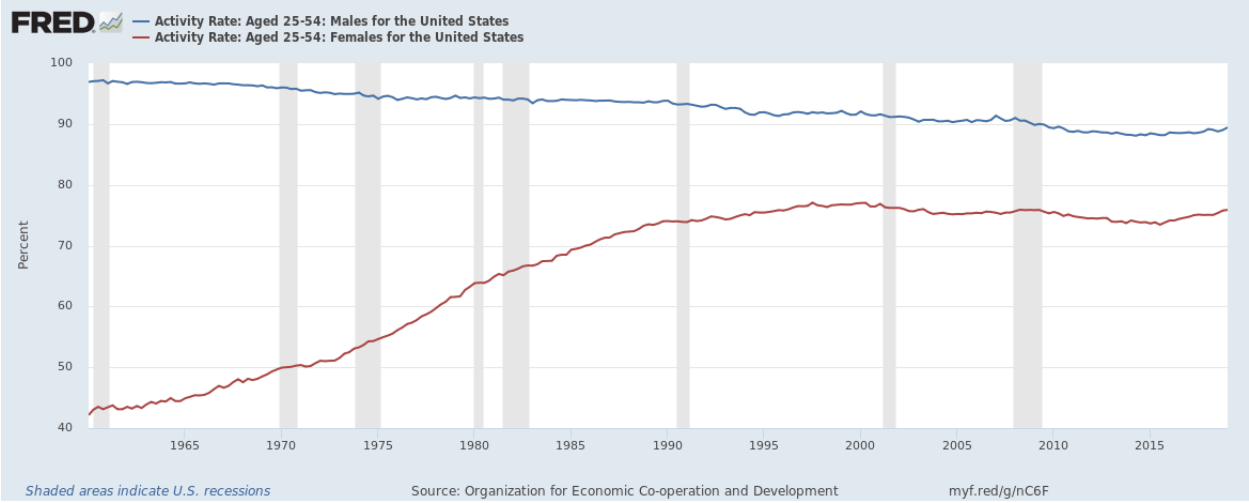
insurance programs, changes in social norms, drug use, and the rise of mass incarceration, which are all more likely to affect prime-age men.

Declining Labor Force Participation Among Prime-Age Men

While the decline in the overall labor force participation rate has drawn interest from researchers and policymakers, particular focus in recent years has been directed at the decline in the labor force participation among the prime-age population, or those between the ages of 25 and 54. These are the ages when men—and increasingly women—are most likely to be working. Figure 2 shows the activity rate[24] for prime-age men and women in the United States from 1960 to 2019. The patterns are largely similar to those in Figure 1: men's labor force participation has declined over time, while women's rose dramatically from 1960 to about 2000, since which time it has plateaued. In particular, the activity rate for prime-age men has decreased from 96.9 percent in 1960 to 89.4 in the first quarter of 2019, a drop of 7.5 percentage points. While this decline is arguably small in absolute terms, it is more pronounced in relative terms: fewer than one in twenty prime-age men were not working or seeking work in 1960, compared with more than one in ten prime-age men in 2019.

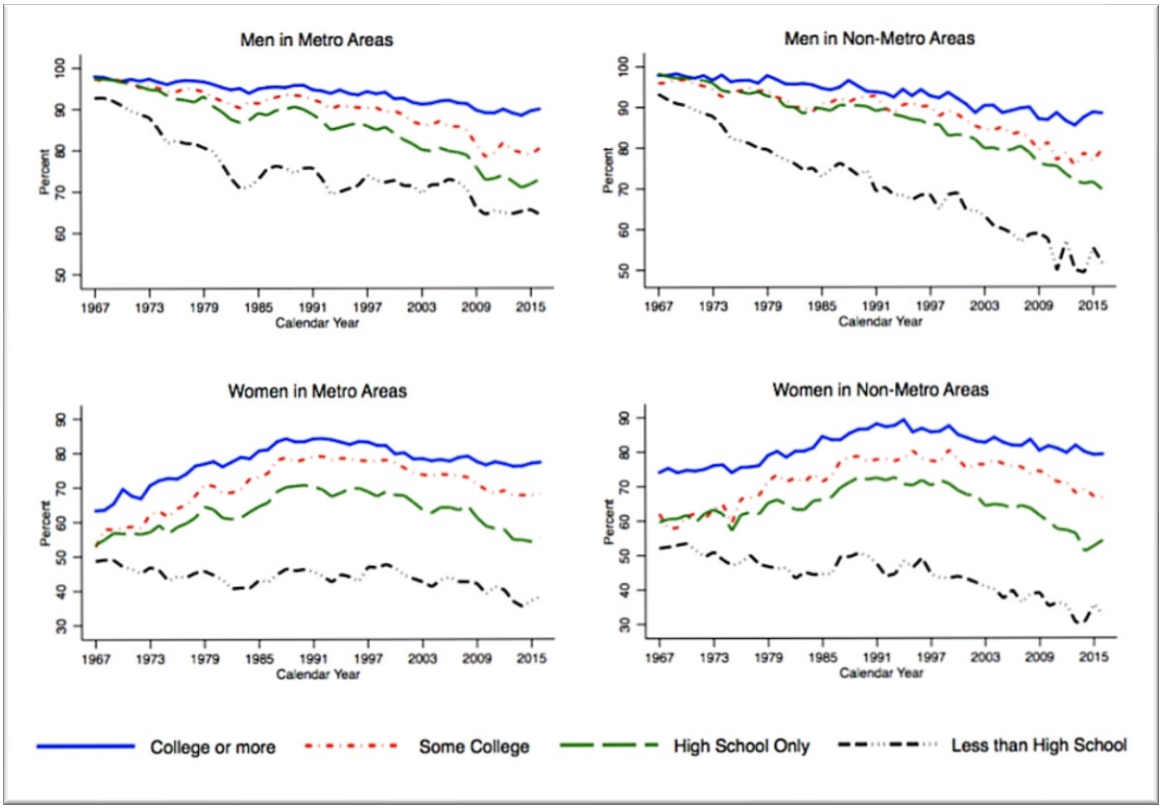
Figure 2.2: Activity Rate for Men and Women, Ages 25-54, 1960-2019[25]

24 The activity rate is another term for the labor force participation rate. The activity rate are those people employed (the active) and those unemployed (potentially active) as a percentage of the total population.
25 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Activity Rate: Aged 25-54: Males for the United States [LRAC25MAUSM156S], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LRAC25MAUSM156S, April 13, 2019.



This decline in labor force participation is even more extreme when stratified by education. Figure 3 (Ziliak 2018) shows trends in employment rates for men and women ages 25 to 64 from 1967 to 2016 by metropolitan status and level of educational attainment. There is a clear relationship between labor force participation and educational attainment: those with more education are more likely to be in the labor force among men and women in both urban and rural settings, a trend that has grown over time. Men of all education levels in 1967 were at least 90 percent in the labor force, but now, men with less than a high school degree have labor force participation rates below 70 percent for urban men and around 50 percent for rural men. For those men with a high school diploma, rates for urban and rural men are around 70 percent. Rates for men with some college are higher than their less-educated counterparts, but still sit at around 80 percent.

Figure 2.3: Employment Rates, Men and Women Ages 25 to 64, by Metropolitan Status and Educational Attainment, 1967 to 2016



Explanations for the decline in labor force participation among less-educated, prime-age men tend to emphasize either supply or demand explanations.[26] The supply-side argument emphasizes the allure and availability of alternative means of support, most centrally disability benefits. As Eberstadt (2016) points out, there is uncertainty about the extent to which nonparticipating, prime-age men depend upon disability benefits, in part because there are several disability programs that are not centrally tracked. According to the White House Council of Economic Advisors (2016), 3.3

26 Eberstadt (2016) and Council of Economic Advisors (2016) both provide excellent overviews of the rise in nonemployment among prime-age males.

percent of prime-age men who are not in the labor force receive SSDI payments, up from just one percent in 1967. Using the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), Eberstadt (2016) finds a rate about double: in 2013, 6.3 percent of prime-age men reported disability payments. However, Eberstadt finds what he calls "an explosion" (2016: 118) of disability recipiency among the households of nonparticipating men: 57 percent of prime-age, nonparticipating men live in households reporting disability benefits. Further, previous research has shown that increases in receipt of SSDI has led to lower labor force participation, especially among veterans (Autor et al. 2016; Autor and Duggan 2003) and lower earners (Gelber, Moore, and Strand 2017). There is also evidence that household members and unearned income are important in supporting nonworking, prime-age men (Council of Economic Advisors 2016; Stewart 2006). Finally, there is evidence that the current opioid crisis and declining labor force participation rates are intertwined (Krueger 2017), including the fact that about half of prime-age men not in the labor force take pain medication on any given day (Krueger 2017), an indication of the role of poor health in incentivizing the move to disability benefits.

Supply-side proponents also point to the fact that there has been a decrease in nonparticipating men who report wanting a job over time (Council of Economic Advisors 2016). In fact, according to the Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) of the Current Population Survey (CPS), only 15% of men who did not work at all in 2014 said it was because they could not find a job (Eberstadt 2016). The most common reason prime-age men in poverty give for nonwork is disability or illness (Rachidi 2016). Yet there is no evidence that men out of the labor force are doing more care work or

housework than their participating peers (Council of Economic Advisors 2016; Eberstadt 2016; Stewart 2008), and substitution of men for women's time does not appear to be a driver of the growing nonparticipation rate (Blau 1997; Council of Economic Advisors 2016; Juhn and Potter 2006). Finally, there is evidence that the biggest divergence of time use between nonparticipating men and their participating peers is in leisure, particularly video games, which some have interpreted to argue that nonparticipating men have been enticed from the labor market by gaming and recreational computer use (Aguiar et al. 2017; Hurst 2016). There is also evidence that nonparticipating men engage in more illegal drug use than their participating peers (Eberstadt 2016). Taken together, this evidence paints a picture of unhealthy, perhaps unmotivated, and even addicted men who have chosen to withdraw their labor force participation in favor of disability benefits, drug use, and gaming (or some combination of all three), but not increased care work.

Demand-side explanations emphasize reductions in demand for low-skilled labor and the low return for work for those at the bottom of the wage distribution. Research shows that skill-biased technological change (Autor et al. 2008a; Goldin and Katz 1998a) depresses wages for occupations that require manual or routine labor, which hits less-educated, prime-age men particularly hard. This is concentrated in industries most exposed to foreign competition and international trade (Autor, Dorn, and Gordon H. Hanson 2013). Further, less-educated Americans have seen a reduction in wages relative to other groups (Council of Economic Advisors 2016; Greenstone and Looney 2011a). Previous studies have linked declining labor market opportunities for low-skilled workers and stagnant real wage growth as the most likely driver in the 1970s and 1980s (Juhn et

al. 1991; Juhn and Potter 2006), and then decreased demand for middle-skill jobs in the 1990s (Aaronson et al. 2014).

Countering the supply-side argument that nonparticipating men are being supported by partners or spouses, there is evidence that the share of nonparticipating men with a household member in the labor force has fallen over time (Council of Economic Advisors 2016), and previous evidence concludes that reliance on spousal income does not seem to be a factor in nonparticipation trends (Juhn and Potter 2006). While there is some disagreement about the effect of SSDI on prime-age male labor force participation, skeptics of this explanation claim the increase is prime-age men receiving disability is not enough to explain the decline in labor force participation among this group (Council of Economic Advisors 2016). Further, a closer look at the employment-to-population ratio tells a story of cyclicality in tune with recessions: each recession knocks some prime-age men out of the labor force, some of whom do not come back. SSDI applications follow the economic cycle (Olsen 2016), suggesting weak labor demand could be the driver of disability rolls, not the reverse (Bernstein 2016). Both supply and demand-side proponents agree that the rise of mass incarceration has played a role in the declining labor force participation rate (Council of Economic Advisors 2016; Eberstadt 2016), especially in explaining the U.S. rate relative to other OECD countries. The incarcerated population is not counted when the BLS calculates the labor force participation rate, but the indirect effect occurs when men (and women) are released and face barriers to employment of various types (Holzer 2009; Pager 2003, 2008).

Findings and Analysis

The findings in this chapter are organized into six sections. First, I explain in more detail how the BLS identifies labor force nonparticipation, and then I apply this measure to the labor force histories of the men in this study to determine their labor force attachment. Second, I briefly discuss the relatively small group of men in this study who have never experienced a spell outside the labor force, the Never-NILFs[27]. Third, I explore what I call *episodic nonparticipation*, defined as periods out of the labor force of less than one year. Fourth, I explore *chronic nonparticipation*, defined as periods of a year or more. For these chronic spells of nonparticipation, I examine the main reasons why men leave for extended periods: the pursuit of education and training; substance abuse; the receipt of disability benefits; and a fourth reason I term *elective nonparticipation*. I also describe a group that I call *marginal men*, about ten percent of those in the study, with tenuous attachment to the labor force. Fifth, I describe *chronic churning*, the phenomenon in which men leave the labor force for extended periods of time but come back and often persist in formal employment. Finally, I examine the blurriness of defining nonwork, including the role of unemployment insurance plays in the lives of many of these men.

Labor Force Participation

When the government determines someone's labor force status for the purposes of calculating the labor force participation rate, the respondent is asked whether they did any

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27 NILF is the acronym for Not in Labor Force.

work for pay or profit during the survey reference week.[28] Those with jobs are considered employed, regardless of whether the job is full-time, part-time, temporary, or seasonal. Also considered employed are those who have a job but were not at work during the reference week for reasons like being on vacation, taking maternity or paternity leave, or involvement in a labor dispute. Those who do not have a job but who are actively looking for work and available to start a job are labeled as unemployed. Actively looking for work is defined as having taken one from among a series of concrete measures toward finding work over the preceding four weeks. The employed and unemployed together make up the labor force. Not included in the labor force are those who are neither employed nor unemployed, meaning those who do not have a job and are not actively looking for work. Common reasons for being not in the labor force according to the BLS definition include being retired, staying at home to care for children or others, and being in school (although one's labor force status is determined irrespective of educational status, so a student with a job or looking for one is considered in the labor force). By definition, the purpose of the BLS is to sort respondents into two discrete categories: those who are participating in the labor force during the survey reference week, and those who aren't.

A key feature of the interview protocol in this study was a thorough questioning about the respondent's full work history, with probes for periods of unemployment or nonwork. Based upon the respondent's lifetime labor force history as described in the interview, I asked of each case if there would have been any times when the BLS would

28 Information for this explanation comes from the Bureau of Labor Statistics at https://www.bls.gov/cps/cps_htgm.htm.

have determined the respondent to be outside the labor force.[29] Using this process, I first sorted the cases into two primary categories: 1) those men continuously in the labor force since high school (or whenever they left high school if they dropped out), and 2) those men for whom there was at least one period of a month or more since high school where they would have been determined to be outside the labor force had they been surveyed by the BLS. Based on this analysis, I determined that 13 of the 61 (21%) men have been continuously in the labor force since high school. Conversely, four-fifths of the of men (48 of 61, or 79%) have spent at least one month outside the labor force since high school. Next, I categorized each period outside the labor force by its length: episodic spells of nonparticipation are those periods outside the labor force of up to one year, and chronic spells are those periods one year or longer. Using these definitions, 34 of the 61 men (56%) have had at least one spell of episodic labor force nonparticipation, and 28 of the 61 men (45%) in the study had at least one spell of chronic labor force nonparticipation. Fourteen of the 61 (23%) had spells of both episodic and chronic nonparticipation.

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29 In most cases, determining the respondent's labor force status at a given time is unambiguous: if they were working full- or part-time, they were employed. If they did not have a job but were actively looking, they were unemployed but still part of the labor force. Some episodes of nonwork are also easy to identify. However, there are cases in which determining labor force status for a particular man during a particular period is more challenging for several reasons that will emerge in this chapter. To the degree possible, I used probing questions during the interview itself to clarify these ambiguities in the moment, knowing that a primary goal of the study was exploring labor force nonparticipation. In these probes, I often asked the respondent how he would have characterized his situation during those periods in which his labor force status was unclear. However, even after seeking clarification, ambiguity sometimes remained. For the purposes of assigning those ambiguous periods to a labor force status, I used my knowledge of the BLS questions and the context of the man's case to make an educated judgment. The analysis in this chapter does not hinge of whether my determination for every ambiguous case matches what the BLS might have found if the man had been interviewed in a given month. In fact, as will become clear in this chapter, these instances where labor force status is unclear provide the opportunity to expose how realities "on the ground" are often more complex than surveys allow.

Before exploring these spells of labor force nonparticipation in more detail, the first finding in this chapter is that relatively few men in this study have either been always working or always nonworking: most men have moved back and forth between these labor force statuses during their lives. As noted, all but twelve of the men in this study have at least one period outside the labor force since high school, and nearly half of the men in the study have had at least one period outside the labor force of a year or longer. Yet, on the whole, the men in this study show a high degree of labor force attachment. The labor force statuses of the men in the study at the time of the interview are in Table 1. Nearly 80 percent of the men were employed at the time of the initial interview, and five percent did not have a job but were actively looking for work, meaning they would be considered in the labor force by the BLS. Thus, about 85 percent of the men in this study would have been considered in the labor force at the time of the interview using the BLS definition, whereas only eight of the 61 men in the study—about 13 percent—would have been considered not in the labor force at the time of the interview. Yet nearly 80 percent of the men in this study have spent at least one month outside the labor force since high school, and nearly half of the men in this study have had a spell of nonwork lasting a year or more. In short, nonwork is woven into these men's labor force histories in a way that a cross-sectional survey would miss.

Table 2.1: Labor Force Status at Time of Interview

	Total (N = 61)	Percent
Work Status (at time of interview)		
Full-time	36	59
Part-time	12	20
Unemployed	5	8
Not in labor force (NILF)	8	13

This finding of fluidity in labor force status over time has at least two important implications for the measurement of nonwork. First, because the categories of worker and nonworker are not static, and a full accounting of declining labor force participation must consider this movement in and out of the labor force over time. This finding is consistent with recent work (Coglianese 2017) suggesting that existing literature about the declining labor force participation rate has overlooked an important third category of worker: those who participate in the labor force some but not all of the time, or "in and outs". Yet these "in and outs" might only be part of the story of labor market fluidity. The CPS data that the BLS uses for the labor force participation rate is a rotating panel design, which follows households for a total of eighteen months: four months on, eight months off, and four months on.[30] Using this data, Coglianese finds a group of men who take short breaks from work: "Most in-and-outs take an occasional short break in between jobs but are otherwise attached to the labor force" (2017: 1). While this finding is analogous to those

30 For more on the CPS design, see https://cps.ipums.org/cps/sample_designs.shtml.

in this study who have periods of *episodic nonparticipation*, it still misses those with longer gaps in employment—*chronic nonparticipation*—who might not show up in the CPS at all. The lifetime labor force histories of the men in this study allows this set of cases to speak to labor force status over the long run in a way that can be missed in the CPS. As we will see in this chapter, there are men who would look quite differently to the BLS at different times in their lives, yet they are the same person.

The finding that many men move in and out of the labor force over time has a second implication for understanding nonwork, namely that we should resist any impulse—implicit or explicit—to reify the categories of worker and nonworker. Categories in survey research must be mutually exclusive by definition; the BLS uses a series of questions to sort all respondents into the categories of in or out of the labor force. This is necessary but carries at least two risks. First, without the full context of the stories of these workers, important nuance and ambiguity can be lost in individual cases. As will emerge over the course of this chapter, there are cases where the actual labor market situation of men is complex, so simply assigning them as a "worker" or "nonworker" misses important context. Second, this finding also suggests that the men who are in and out of the labor force are not the same men from year-to-year or even month-to-month. There are cases discussed in this chapter where a man might have been largely out of the labor force for long stretches during one period of life but then fully attached during a different period. A cross-sectional survey of the men in this study would not only find different rates of nonwork at different times, but the men in and out of the labor force would also be different. For much of the remainder of this chapter, I use the rich detail of the cases in this study to explore the context for these periods of

nonwork, although I begin with the thirteen men who have not had a period outside the labor force since high school.

Never-NILFs

Thirteen of the 61 men in this study have been continuously in the labor force, a group I dub the Never-NILFs. These men are displayed in Table 2, arranged by current hourly wage, along with their age, highest level of education, and current occupation. There are a few themes that link these cases. First, relatively few of these men pursued post-secondary education or training. While this may seem counter-intuitive given this group's continuous labor force attachment, one of the main reasons men in this study had a period of episodic nonparticipation is the pursuit of education or training. From the perspective of the BLS, one's educational status is immaterial when determining labor force status; what matters is whether someone—student or not—worked for pay during the survey reference week. However, we know that those in school often take time off from work when pursuing their studies. With this context, it is not surprising that most of the Never-NILFs did not pursue education after high school, which removes one of the main reasons why men leave the labor force. Of the thirteen Never-NILFs, four pursued a short-term credential and only two pursued college. In all cases, the men worked at least part-time during the full duration of their education or training, thus remaining continuously in the labor force. However, in most cases, these men went from high school directly into the labor force.

A second theme among these cases is that a disproportionate number of the Never-NILFs are self-employed when compared with the cases overall. While this is not

causally related to their status as Never-NILFs, it makes intuitive sense when assessing labor force status. If one is "the boss," it is less likely one loses his job, even if business is slow. Two of the Never-NILFs are self-employed contractors; another runs his own trucking business; two work for family businesses; another consults with microbreweries; and another receives disability but makes money consistently on the side out of his house. While self-employment creates the potential for volatility on other variables like income, it makes labor force status—at least from the perspective of the BLS—arguably more secure. Finally, about the same percentage of Never-NILFs have good jobs as the sample overall, indicating that continuous attachment to the labor force, while perhaps a social good in-and-of-itself, does not make a man in this study more likely to earn a relatively high wage. There is one man among this group for whom I do not have income information, but of the remaining twelve, four of them—33 percent—have jobs that pay over $20 an hour. More about "good jobs" will be discussed in Chapter 4, but it does not appear that continuous labor force attachment itself is a predictor of having a better job. As the focus of this chapter is on nonwork, I now turn in greater detail to men with episodic and chronic periods of labor force nonparticipation.

Table 2.2: Never-NILFs (N=13)

Name	Age	Highest Level of Education	Current Occupation	Current Wage
Steve	47	High school	Unemployed	$0.00/hour
Anthony	26	High school	Self-employed	$70/two weeks
Jordan	24	BA	Self-employed	~$1,000/month
Randy	37	AA	Self-employed	$11.25/hour
Paul	39	High school	Front desk attendant	$13.00/hour
Doug	30	High school	Chef	$29,000/year
Nick	38	Credential	Heavy equipment operator	$14.65/hour
Cameron	33	High school	Self-employed	$36,000/year
Thomas	32	High school	Self-employed	~$20.00/hour
Sean	39	Credential	Law enforcement	$26.00/hour
Jeff	25	Credential	Carpenter	$29.61/hour
Todd	46	High school	Self-employed	$150,000/year
Brett	32	Credential	Self-employed	Unknown

Episodic Nonparticipation

This section examines the shorter-term spells outside the labor force that I call episodic nonparticipation, defined as periods outside the labor force that lasted at least one month but less than one year. A majority of the men in this study—34 of 61, or 56%—had at least one such spell of nonwork. Of those 34 men with at least one spell of episodic nonparticipation, 14 also had at least one spell of chronic nonparticipation, or a period outside the labor force of a year or more. This section only considers the 20 men in the study who *only* had spells of episodic nonparticipation but no spells of chronic nonparticipation. Among the 20 with only episodic nonparticipation, by far the most common reason for a short-term spell outside the labor force was the pursuit of post-

secondary education or training. As mentioned above, one's labor force status is independent from whether one is in school, but students are often less likely to be working. These shorter-term spells of nonwork for reasons of education take several different forms. In some cases, men went to college after high school, only to learn that college was not for them and pivot quickly to the labor force. For example, Derek did one semester at a technical college before leaving school: "I just didn't like it. I didn't like the schoolin'." When Derek got a job offer at a local tool and die shop, he left school for work and has been continuously in the labor force ever since, despite being laid off twice. Don's time in college was also short-lived. He went to college after high school to pursue a degree in wildlife technology, but he also realized it was not for him: "But I literally partied my way out of school. But I was done with school. At 12 years, you know, I hated it. I went to college because I was supposed to and I didn't last very long there." As with Derek, things worked out for Don: he worked on a farm for a couple years, and then got an offer to work in the oil and gas industry, a job he has had for the last 22 years. While both Derek and Don have been stably employed for years, they technically have not been continuously in the labor force due to their brief times pursuing higher education after high school. For other men, the pursuit of high education was more enduring. Phil, who went to school to be a registered nurse, worked his way through school except for one summer when he chose not to work. He finished with his associate degree in five semesters, but because of his summer off, he technically has not been continuously in the labor force since high school in the eyes of the BLS.

Another reason a few men in the study took shorter times out of the labor force related to their military service. Larry and Blake, who served in the Army and Coast

Guard respectively, both took a little time off before and after their military service. Both men had a gap between when they enlisted and when they started boot camp, and each took that time to relax. Larry joined right out of high school, so he took the month off between graduating and starting in the Army. Blake had a longer wait, and he primarily used the time to get into better physical shape. Similarly, after getting out, both men had saved up some money and took the opportunity for a break. As Larry said, "So, then I come back here, and I'm like, I have some money saved up, so I might as well take a month off and just not doing anything." It was a chance for both men to make up for lost time. As Blake explained,

> And then I just went hunting, just kind of hang out. And, you know, just getting back with family… I missed my brother's wedding, I missed my brother's graduation, all that kind of stuff. So just, able to catch up. And then after that it was in January, I started looking for a job…

Scott's time out of the labor force was less voluntary. He joined the reserves after high school and was working in fast food when he was called up to active duty. After serving a tour in the Middle East, he was advised by the military to take a break before starting work:

> Um, so they said you know, we've seen people go back, and um, jump straight back into working, it just doesn't work, so you really should think about if you can afford it, like they were talking about the families that had bills to pay and stuff. If you can afford it, don't work for at least a month.

Scott neglected this advice and went straight back to McDonald's. Calling it "definitely the worst decision of my life," he found the transition too much: "Um, transitioning from being out in the middle of a desert back into um, especially a job like McDonald's, where things fast paced... um, I wasn't ready for it." He made it a couple months and quit. He tried a factory job, but he found he also hated that work, so he

moved to Florida where he lived with a cousin and blew off steam before returning to Pennsylvania and resuming work.

In a few cases, men were laid off from work and took the opportunity to pursue more education or training, which took them out of the labor force for a relatively short time. Dan had worked for seven years at a warehouse, and when the company did some restructuring, they offered voluntary layoffs. He took the layoff, drew unemployment insurance, and used the opportunity to take a six-week course to earn his Commercial Driver's License (CDL), after which he started as a long-haul truck driver. Similarly, Gary was laid off when the salvage operation where he worked for closed their local office, so he drew unemployment insurance and used the time to pursue what he called "nurse's training." However, in Gary's case, his unemployment ran out before he could complete the training, so he had to abandon his studies and find another job to support his family. He was clearly upset by this development and had a different impression of the terms of his unemployment: "I was told if I started school, then my unemployment would keep going until I was done with school. I got comments, Obama said that uh, we're cutting all, we're not giving any extensions on unemployment. That's cruel. I'm trying to better myself." Both of these instances involve unemployment insurance, which provided temporary income that allowed Dan and Gary to seek retraining, not immediately jump into another job. Whether or not these episodes should be viewed as nonwork from the perspective of the BLS is complex, a topic I address in more detail later in this chapter.

Overall, a consistent picture emerges of the men who only had episodic spells of nonparticipation: almost all of them have been continuously attached to the labor force except for brief but understandable periods away from work for education or recovery

from military service. This resonates with the work of Coglianese (2017), who finds that there are a growing number of men who take short breaks from work but are otherwise attached to the labor force most of the time. Further, Coglianese finds that the rise of in-and-outs is driven partly by partner earnings in cases where men are married or cohabiting, and partly by virtue of living with parents for men who are single. This generally comports with the findings in this study, although given the younger nature of the men in this study, virtually all of the episodic nonwork among this group occurred among men who were single and childless at the time; only Gary had children at the time of his episodic nonparticipation.

Three of the twenty cases of men who only have spells of episodic nonwork do not fit the general pattern. These three men are all young—under 27—and have struggled to consistently attach to the labor force. They do not have chronic nonparticipation because they have had periodic jobs or shown periodic work effort, but on the whole, they have either been unemployed or out of the labor force for long stretches of their early adult lives. Because these three men are qualitatively different than the others, I will treat their cases later in the chapter when I discuss those who I am calling *marginal men*, meaning those men in the study who are marginally attached to the labor force, regardless of whether their spells of nonwork are episodic or chronic. I now turn to consideration of those longer spells of nonwork, chronic nonparticipation.

Chronic Nonparticipation

While episodic nonparticipation is important to understand, it is chronic nonparticipation—spells outside the labor force of one year or longer—that is of greatest

interest to observers of the declining labor force participation rate among prime-age men. It is understandable and perhaps not surprising that men who are otherwise attached to the labor force for years at a time might occasionally take time out of the labor force for the reasons found above. It is less explicable why men in their prime-earning years would go for one or even more years without working or seeking work. Despite the high degree of labor force attachment of the men in this study at the time of interview (85%), an examination of the full labor force narratives of these 61 men finds that 28 of the 61—or 46%—have had at least one spell of chronic nonparticipation since graduating from high school. In this section, I explore the four primary reasons for these extended labor force exits among the men in this study: the pursuit of education and training; struggles with substance abuse; the receipt of disability benefits; and what I call *elective nonparticipation*, in which men chose to spend time not working, often enabled by some combination of under-the-table work and support from family and friends.

Education

The least surprising and most socially acceptable reason why men in this study had extended time out of the labor force was for the pursuit of education or training. As we saw above, this was the primary reason why men had episodic spells of nonparticipation as well. In some cases, episodic nonparticipation for reasons of education was because the pursuit of the education itself was short-lived, such as when men realized that they were not suited for college and quickly pivoted to the labor force. In other cases, men completed their education but also worked to put themselves through school, meaning their time out of the labor force was short-lived even though they

finished their credential or degree. This story is similar among those who took longer periods out of the labor force for school. About half of the men who had a spell of chronic nonparticipation for education ultimately earned their degree, while the other half did not. In this sense, spending a longer time out of the labor force for education did not necessarily increase the likelihood of earning the degree. However, unlike the men who had a short spell of nonwork for education, most of the men who had a chronic spell pursued at least an associate degree, often a bachelor's degree.

Kyle went to a nearby state university after high school. He started as a business major but switched to sociology. He did not work during his first few years of school, but when his girlfriend got pregnant, Kyle needed to find a job. He found a customer service job and tried to stay in school, but that lasted for about six months before he found it to be too much:

> … because I was taking night classes, I was driving to [school], I have to work about two nights a week, and I was just absolutely beat, I had fallen asleep almost behind the wheel, so I had to stop that, it wasn't worth it. And then I was irritable, and you know what I mean, an asshole, like I got home and tired, tired dealing with everybody.

Kyle dropped out with about a year and half to go before earning his degree. He has worked several customer service jobs in the years since leaving school and currently works part-time at a grocery store for $10 an hour. Now 29, Kyle doesn't see himself going back:

> Uh, I don't, I can't see myself going back right now. Um, just you know, I don't know, I can't see myself going back, being around eighteen-year olds again, I don't know how well I would fit, um, and then just the time, and not being able to work, you know what I mean? Time to bring up a paycheck.

Kyle isn't the only man who took extended time out of the labor force but still ended up short of his bachelor's degree. Victor, one of the few men in the study not

originally from northwestern Pennsylvania, has dabbled in school over the years, eventually earning an associate degree in business administration from a community college in Florida while working as a bartender before moving to northwestern Pennsylvania, where his wife was raised. He was just a few classes short of his bachelor's degree in Florida, but he was turned off from finishing after taking an internship from a commercial real estate company. The company told him they would hire him after he finished his degree, but the starting salary would have been half of what he was already making as a bartender. He said, "I was like four classes away or something like that, and I was just like, 'This is silly.'" He is currently unemployed but had a lead on a good-paying sales job at the time of our interview. Jeremiah completed five semesters of college between two different schools but never earned a certificate or degree. He didn't work during that time, having been awarded an insurance settlement from a car accident. It was a time he described as his "reverse retirement," "just kind of hanging out and traveling around." Concerning the schooling itself, he said, "I kind of got to the point where I wasn't sure what I wanted to do; I had no focus or direction, and I decided to take a break and I stopped."

A few of the men were more successful in earning a degree in return for their time out of the labor force, although it was not without obstacles. Dustin started at a local branch campus taking general education courses and figuring out what he wanted to do. He decided to pursue industrial arts and transferred to a state university a few hours away with a corresponding degree program, but when the cousin he was living with left the school, Dustin was "homesick on my own" and ended up moving home. For the next two years, he worked at a couple local manufacturers, eventually getting laid off. It was

during this time he saw an ad for an associate degree program in x-ray technology, so he enrolled. With the benefit of living at home and having unemployment insurance from his layoff, he did not have to work as he completed his degree. Likewise, Dennis had the benefit of his GI Bill and unemployment insurance drawn from his military discharge that allowed him to complete his associate degree without working.

Substance Abuse

For a few of the men in the study, addiction to drugs or alcohol made maintaining labor force attachment a challenge, which connects these findings with existing work that highlights the role of drug abuse with declining labor force nonparticipation (Krueger 2017). When Sam graduated from high school, he said the only things he cared about were drinking and playing baseball. But after drinking himself out of two universities, he landed back in his hometown, where he enrolled in a local university and got a job at his family's business. His drinking was taking its toll on his performance at work, and he wondered why some of his coworkers seemed to recover so quickly from nights of hard drinking. When he learned that it was because of crystal meth, it began his descent into addiction and eventually making and selling the drug. For two and half years in his early twenties, Sam dropped out of the labor force to make, sell, and take crystal meth. These were not idle times, as he was driving countless miles to buy the components of meth and then making and selling the drug. Sam explained,

> I mean, it was a lot of work. I had to deal with a lot of people that I didn't want to deal with, like scummy, dirty people. But I needed to get my ingredients so I could have more, and I couldn't go without it and if I wanted to pay my bills, I had to have you know, I had to have product to sell. So, it was either me producing it or trading what I had to somebody else who was producing it to get

> product. I mean, it was a job, it was horrible. I mean it was the worse job in the whole world.

A brush with law enforcement in his mid-twenties caused him to get a job and stay clean for a few years, during which time he finished his bachelor's degree. However, in his late twenties he started using again, this time including other drugs like cocaine. For another two years, Sam was out of the labor force due to his addiction. This period ended abruptly when he was arrested on more serious charges, for which he eventually was sentenced to five years in prison, of which he served three and a half. (Those who are in residential facilities, including prison, are not counted in the labor force participation rate.) Released from prison in his early thirties, Sam finally managed to stay on the straight and narrow. Now over six years later, he is married with a child and works in management at a local manufacturer.

Curtis has a similar experience with drugs, although his addiction started with a prescription. He had already smoked weed and moved to Ritalin when he was prescribed Vicodin for a disability when he was a teenager, which began his decade-long descent into drug use:

> It was a good time back then because, I mean, it just made you feel good. But uh, ended up getting really bad into it. And I ended up starting to sell drugs to make money for, you know, better ones obviously. And just got deeper and deeper until eventually that's just what I did. There was a good stretch where I was probably spending a good five to $800 a day to maintain the habit. It was a, yeah, it was crazy.

Curtis dropped out of high school at 17 and had so many run-ins with law enforcement: "I don't even remember all of them now." He moved among a number of apartments and had attempts to get clean, but nothing worked. During this time, he unknowingly participated in some controlled drug buys, and eventually, his apartment

was raided. He got out on bail but kept using until "my dad pretty much forced me" into a rehab program. Even that did not stick:

> But still um, like I would come back home on visits or whatever and like they give you a little bit of time every now and then to come back home on a visit and I would know I would hook up in and take it back to rehab and do the same stupid thing, but started struggling with it more at that point. Um, like not really wanting to go back to it, but that's what I knew.

He returned from rehab and waited for his court date. Once the court date arrived, Curtis was expecting a harsh sentence, but he was let off easy due to some mistakes made by the police. Curtis still had to spend a few days in jail, which for him marked a turning point:

> But, so while I was in jail, um, that was the huge turning point, turning point in my life. I mean everyone in there was just crazy. Like it was they were—I knew most of them, but they were just, they didn't care. Like they just, it was just a little state of them, like they did something stupid and they were planning on going out and doing the same thing and they just didn't even care.

Curtis was released and has managed to stay away from drugs, even when he was prescribed Vicodin when his wisdom teeth were removed. He got a job at a local manufacturer that he has held for almost seven years. Now married with a young child, Curtis has been attached to the labor force almost as long and he was absent from it due to his addiction.

Alex, now in his early forties, went for over fifteen years without being able to hold a job due to his alcoholism. Between finishing high school in the early 1990s and entering residential treatment in 2007 and again in 2010, he attempted jobs at no less than twelve businesses, but none of them stuck for any significant length of time. The jobs ranged from fast food to entry-level manufacturing, but none paid well and none lasted.

Married with children during this time, even those familial duties could not pull Alex from his addiction. He explains,

> I had my... with the drinking struggles, so, I probably just, uh, I would...I would collect unemployment and I wasn't really rushing to get a job. But, what that did was, it put more time to me for myself and then when the kids go off to school, is when maybe I'd want to drink more because I wouldn't really have anything to do, I was bored. So, it's easy for someone to get in a rut like that. And then go...and then it to go on forever and, you know.

After two stints in residential treatment, Alex finally managed to get clean in 2010. His marriage had ended and he moved back in with his parents, where he still lives. However, once clean, Alex has managed to stay stably employed for the last six years as a direct care staff at a local nursing home.

Not all the stories involving substance abuse unfolded in same way as Sam, Curtis, and Alex. For example, not all men in this study with substance abuse problems have reattached to the labor force. Although still just 22, Frank has never held a job other than as a drug dealer aside from short stint in construction. He said he has tried most every drug and is a recovering opioid addict. Now he just smokes weed, and even that he tries not to do too often. But for Frank, selling drugs is what he knows:

> So, just sold weed for a while and, like, I don't know, that's just—that's just how I supported myself. It's how I knew to do it. It was easy. You could literally, like, do it, to where you're only dealing with three people, and you're not getting in trouble. And that's just—that was it. It will support you.

Because the work is so easy, Frank admits it's hard to move to legitimate work: "I don't know, like, when you start, it's very difficult to go to a minimum wage job from doing that. It's very difficult." Yet he also expresses his desire to get a legitimate job and avoid going to prison. Not all struggles with substance abuse among the men in the study have resulted in labor force exit. For example, Don has struggled with alcoholism for

years, but it never cost him his job, due in part to the fact that he has a job where he is mostly on his own. He admits being hungover at work, but since his work is solitary, he admits he's been lucky: "I probably could have failed a DUI test midday the next day. But it really… I'm lucky. I never got a DUI."

A couple men in the study not yet mentioned also are recovering from opioid addictions, but they were out of the labor force for other reasons before their addictions occurred. Brad, now 37, describes himself as an alcoholic when he was young; he says he stopped drinking about the time it would have been legal for him to start. Back problems in his early twenties qualified him for SSDI, after which he developed his addiction: "You start off normal. Just because of it being prescribed for pain. But that's how it always starts with everybody. And it's the worst thing anybody can put on me. Since I've been off, I actually hurt less than I ever did taking them." Clean for eighteen months, Brad has reentered the labor force while keeping his disability; he works very limited hours at a local tattoo parlor, less for the money and mainly for the company and the structure. Carl, 31, was addicted to opioids from ages 17 to 30, a time during which he was often out of the labor force, although that was less due to drugs and more to his general attitude toward work. It was the birth of his daughter that he says woke him up about his addiction; he said he knew he would die if he did not get clean. The first step was admitting he had a problem: "And the funny thing was, the entire time I was like, 'These fucking drug addicts', you know? But it took a long, a long, long time for me to admit to myself that I was a drug addict." He lamented:

> But it's amazing to me, ah, how many people even in this town right now, the older folks and stuff like that, that are taking these pills daily because it's prescribed to them and they think, "Well, it's fine, I'm allowed to. It's being given to me by a doctor, he went to school for a long time and he knows."

Disability Benefits

Another reason why some men were outside the labor force was the receipt of disability benefits, although as I will discuss later in the chapter, several men who receive these benefits have returned to the labor force, formally and informally. Some men were originally diagnosed for childhood disabilities that have persisted into adulthood; some receive disability for trauma related to military service; and some for other health problems or workplace-related injuries.

Three men—Anthony, Richard, and Trevor—received disability diagnoses as children that qualified them for Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Anthony, now 26, was diagnosed with a brain tumor at age nine and rushed into surgery. He recovered but still attends therapy and cannot drive due to his risk of seizures. He lives at home with his parents and younger brother and gets between $500-600 per month in benefits, plus a small amount in food stamps. He has worked in the formal labor market on occasion, including several years as a part-time dishwasher at a local restaurant. But his primary pursuit is as a self-employed craftsperson and researcher. Anthony makes crafts and sells them online, as well as conducts genealogical research for hire. While he estimates he only brings in about $70 every two weeks through these jobs, he treats them seriously and most weeks can be found pursuing them diligently. In fact, despite receiving SSI, Anthony is a Never-NILF for the purposes of this study, as he has been doing work "for pay or profit" consistently since finishing high school.

Richard and Trevor have also shown a fair degree of work effort despite having disability diagnoses as children. Richard's mother experienced birth complications that

resulted in Richard being born with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Richard receives a full suite of services, including SSI, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and housing assistance. Nonetheless, Richard has made several attempts to work, although all have been short-lived:

> Yeah, I've been disability, on disability almost for my whole life. But I, I stopped disability a few times for the, like um, jobs I had, and then I didn't work out with them jobs, so I'd get put back put on Social Security disability because, because I, I, I didn't, I, I couldn't, I couldn't handle them jobs…

Trevor was born blind in one eye, which he says qualified him for support. Yet Trevor mostly worked from the time he dropped out of high school until a series of back problems in his thirties pushed him back onto disability as an adult:

> I've always had disability because of my eyes. I just chose to work instead of, instead of collecting the disability. Soon as my eyes got bad enough to the point where I couldn't see… and I had the vertebrae removed in my bottom of my back, I just couldn't – I just – I got disability instantly because I've always had it, you know, I mean, I'm blind.

Trevor, who showed me photos of his surgical scars and clearly has trouble with mobility, currently survives on a combination of his disability and "buying and selling stuff" where he salvages items from the "side of the road… people moving out throw stuff out and don't know what it's worth." He does this side hustle as his health allows:

> Yeah, there's, there's months that I really struggle, you know, and have to borrow money or something like that, but, but for the most part I can usually make anywhere from twenty to a hundred bucks a day you know, if um, if I'm physically able and capable of going around looking for stuff to sell.

Two men in the study receive disability benefits from trauma experienced in military service. Brandon, served eight years as an Army mechanic, including two tours in Korea and one in Afghanistan. He says loved the military, but he didn't realize the toll it took until he returned:

> You don't really notice until you get back. While you're over there, you're kind of in an alert stance the whole time you're there. When you come back, you're kind of settling down a little bit. You're done with this. That's when all the stuff starts kicking in. Like when I got back, I'm like damn. Glad I made it out of there ok.

Upon his discharge, Brandon went to the Veterans Administration to sign up for benefits:

> It's pretty much like I have to go see a behavioral health specialist and talk about stuff down in Afghanistan. All my problems and stuff. Then you go, I guess there's a pension... a pension and compensation place that you go to. Tell them your story. They put it into a board I guess, and they decide if you're going to get any kind of disability for it. So, I got like seventy percent just for my depression and anxiety alone. Not to mention like I didn't even put in for PTSD.

Brandon mentions potentially using his GI Bill to pursue computer repair or nursing, but these days, he does not go out much: "I am much the closest thing you'll probably find to a hermit apart from living in a cave, you know." He says, "I don't really deal with people too well." He puts in a job application from time to time and recently did piecework for a local manufacturer, but with his disability, he says work is more for something to do.

A couple other men who served in the military have applied or considered applying. Scott, who works in fast food, said he had knee surgery while in the military, so he "can always reapply for disability." Justin, another veteran and currently elementary school teacher who thinks he probably has grounds for a claim, is uneasy with benefits of any kind, hence one reason why he resists disability:

> I don't like to be a burden… I don't push to get partial disability for my hearing loss or anything like that either. Um, I also have post-traumatic stress disorder, which is very thrown around these days. Who doesn't, right? Um, but yeah, I don't push that and mostly because ah, all the only thing... is that I can't really watch firework displays very well, and someone pops a balloon, it's gonna ruin my day for a couple of minutes, but I don't... I don't feel the need to take money I don't need just because I can, if that makes sense. I think that's part of the attitudes that makes worlds a little bit worse.

A few men in the study receive disability benefits for health problems or workplace injuries. Jared was making good money as a long-haul truck driver when a series of heart attacks and strokes pushed him from the road to the disability rolls. It took him multiple attempts to qualify for benefits, a process that ultimately took about two years, during which it was a struggle for him to make ends meet. He lived on savings, but he also relied on the help of others, including getting help from a family who themselves relied on government assistance. Brad, who we met above because of the addiction to opioids he developed while on disability, applied for disability originally due to his "multiple back surgeries" from working for a company that installed rubber roofs on commercial buildings. Curtis, who we also first encountered because of his addiction to drugs, qualified for disability benefits at age 18 for a birth condition that affected his leg. Although his leg still bothers him, he gave up his disability seven years ago to work in a factory after he got off drugs and avoided prison time.

As we see in these cases, there are several paths to the receipt of disability benefits, but receipt of benefits itself is not a permanent off ramp from the labor force. Disability provides an income floor for men with various diagnoses, but the fact also remains that most men in this study who receive disability benefits currently work—some above and some under-the-table—or have tried to work in the past. In some cases, the work is primarily for the money, but in others, it is as much for community and structure. Previous work on livelihood strategies in rural America shows that disability receipt is one of the least morally acceptable ways of making ends meet, ranking below unemployment insurance and just above welfare (Sherman 2006, 2009). And there is longstanding evidence that poor and working-class people are often the harshest judges of

those who are believed to unjustly receive government benefits (Edin and Lein 1997). These findings often focus on the ways racial stereotypes about African Americans influence white views on welfare (Gilens 1996), but in this study, these views also exist within racial groups, as 95 percent of the study participants and those in the field site are white. Men expressed everything from mild suspicion to scorn for those who receive benefits, although often couched in language indicating that benefits should exist for those who really need them. Jeff, for example, a union carpenter, was suspicious of his neighbor who receives disability:

> Um I, it comes down to every individual person. I could sit down and judge people all day. I don't know their whole story. Um, I have a neighbor who lives that way, like directly that way, he injured himself. He's forty-five and he's a dull head now and he doesn't work. He collects disability; it's not a lot of disability, but I feel like he could do something. He's able, he's willing, but he's just so wrapped up all the time. He's, he's in good shape. I mean, stuff like that really fries me. I'm going to work, making an effort to live, and then there's people like that that really don't give a crap. I get that. I feel like it's for the, for the single mom, things like that. Or for the disabled people, not somebody that's able. I mean, I know that he's got some problems, but I feel like a lot of people are that don't need to be on it and I'm helping to pay for it. It's enough to piss you off.

But as Jared, the former truck driver now on disability, made clear in his interview, those who think he has it made don't understand the realities of living on disability:

> I only make nine nineteen a month to live on and stuff. Before I met her [his wife], that's what I was living on, paying rent, paying bills and what was left over I lived on, you know? And everybody, I mean, I wake up a lot of people. Oh, "you're on disability, you got it made." No, I don't, dude. You know, I mean, I've worked for what I got, but still, it's rough. I don't have no extras or nothing and stuff like that. And I would, I mean you can ask [my wife], I would love to be out there working. You can ask her. There's days I sit there at the park watch trucks go by just wishing I was still driving, you know. Seeing my friends drive, you know, and waving at them and shit like that. It's just, forty-three years old and I'm shut down for life, you know. Never have a driver's license again and stuff, so...

Elective Nonparticipation

A final reason why men have spells outside the labor force of a year or longer is what I call *elective nonparticipation*, which are periods where men drop out of the formal labor force, enabled by some combination of under-the-table work and support from family or friends. About half of the spells of chronic labor force dropout among men in this study are due to elective nonparticipation. Elective nonparticipators generally show a high degree of labor force attachment, but for various reasons, they have at least one long period out of the labor force for reasons other than education, substance abuse, or disability. Jeremy, in his late 30s when interviewed, has worked most of his life but had two stints of labor force nonparticipation in his 20s that lasted about two years each. In both cases, he had been laid off from a low-wage job and initially qualified for unemployment insurance. Single and still living at home, he chose to delay his job search in favor of living on his UI, supplemented with under-the-table work. His only bill was his truck payment, so expenses were low. He says he probably worked about every other day: "If I wanted to work, it was available." He helped the household ("I brought in enough to help out around the house and do whatever I wanted to do"), but he also did a lot of fishing and four-wheeling. He admitted he was uneasy about the arrangement, but it was also easy to get accustomed to it, especially given the comparatively low return for his labor in the formal marketplace. He explained,

> I'd gotten accustomed to it. It was easy. I can see how some people get into the mindset of, 'Well, if I can get this for doing very little, why should I go, why should I get a job, a full-time job and have to get up at o-dark-thirty every day and get home in the dark and whatever and not have much to show for it.' Cause I was doing all these part-time jobs and odd jobs and things like that and that was

> bringing in almost the same amount of money and only working maybe fifty percent of the time.

Jeremy eventually went back to work after each spell of elective nonparticipation. The first time he simply re-entered the labor force into a manual job that paid just above the minimum wage. It was his layoff from that job four years later that prompted his second stint of elective nonparticipation. His second reentry into the formal labor force coincided with meeting the woman who is now his wife. In fact, his wife helped him apply for non-civil service jobs with the state, one of which he eventually got. His hourly rate, while still relatively modest, is almost twice the minimum wage, but the benefits make the job worthwhile:

> Benefits are real good. That is one of the main reasons why I'm still there. My benefits cover the full family, including my two step-children, my two step-daughters. My union benefits, well my union dues and things like that, my medical benefits that includes health, vision, dental, prescription, the whole nine yards.

Although he is trying to move to a different department because of conflict with his current boss, he has no plans to leave: "Wherever I go, I plan on staying within the state system. I plan on retiring from the state."

Like Jeremy, Seth has a story of spending many years churning through a series of low-paying jobs before finally attaching to more remunerative work. After high school, Seth worked a series of jobs, including time in manufacturing, manual labor, customer service, and sales. Some work paid better than others, but none of the jobs offered a clear path forward. When he was laid off from the sales job, Seth drew unemployment insurance and stayed out of the formal labor force for a year and a half: "Year and a half I floated. Totally floated." Seth did what he needed to do to bring in enough income to supplement his UI:

> Just cash. Nothing really crazy to report. Nothing. I mean, if I was gonna make eight or $9,000, I probably would've reported it. But a lot of it was all cash transactions. Just here's 50 bucks. Mow the grass. Clean the garage. You know, haul that junk out to the pile and burn it. Okay, I could do that all day long. And I was that guy that always did the outdoor work.

Without much intention, Seth slowly worked his way back into the formal labor force. One of the jobs he did on occasion was piling lumber, a common entry-level job in the area that many men in this study have done at one time or another. One of the men Seth worked for as a piler eventually hired him onto a traveling crew, and at that point, Seth wanted things to be on the books: "I was worried if we worked so long for somewhere for some guy, you know, it was all cash transactions and it was gonna bite me." Seth spoke well of his boss's "down-to-earth" nature, but at the same time, Seth complained about the disparity between his pay and the boss's wealth: "… he's building a $40,000 fireplace, he's only paying me $12 an hour to pile lumber as fast as I can move all day." Seth, by then in his early 30s, knew he was "going nowhere" and needed something better. He worked on the lumber crew for a couple years, but he was applying for jobs constantly: "I couldn't figure out why am I not getting hired for all these jobs. I'm applying everywhere. I did some interviews." He got more savvy about his resume, and he feels like that helped get himself in the door working in the warehouse of a local manufacturer. Fortunately for Seth, it is a union employer, so he started at $15.65 an hour. In the years since, he was switched positions, had his employer pay for additional education, and now makes $21.65 with additional incentives for working second shift.

Ryan has worked most of his adult life but has had two stints of about a year each outside the labor force. The oldest of six kids, Ryan grew up in a trailer outside of a small town. Ryan's dad did long-haul trucking so was often gone, but Ryan enjoyed time with

his dad when he was home: “that’s where the good part came in.” However, Ryan’s dad died when he was sixteen, throwing the family into turmoil. The family moved into the nearby town, but his mom was using drugs and would disappear for long stretches such that he and his brother would have to handle the household. Both he and his brother dropped out of high school and began working to support the family; the money his mom received in survivor’s benefits went to drugs and gambling. Ryan’s first job was at factory for minimum wage, after which he worked for several years as a pool installer for $8.00 an hour with no guaranteed hours, overtime pay, breaks, or lunches. He moved on to telemarketing but was fired for swearing on a call. By this point, he was on his own and living with his girlfriend, who was expecting their first child. He got a job, but it required travel, so he decided he would rather be home:

> After having a daughter, I’m like, “You know, I really need a job, but this is kinda neat, you know. I’m not gonna go back to it. I wanna, you know, spend two weeks to a month with my daughter anyways, growing up, you know. [The travel job] wasn’t a job for somebody who just had a kid anyways, being on the road a week at a time. So, I didn’t work there for a while…”

He eventually got a job in maintenance at a motel for minimum wage, but when that job ended, Ryan again had a spell outside the formal labor force. During these stretches of elective nonparticipation, Ryan’s girlfriend worked nights at a local restaurant, so he helped with the kids during the day: “With her working and I wasn’t working, we had somebody to sit with the kids, you know, the house stayed clean. I-I, you know, I was watching the kids, cleaning the house, cooking dinner, breakfast, all that. You know, Mr. Mom stuff.” Ryan would sometimes take day labor, depending on the weather and who had money:

> I mean, it seemed one month, it might be I was working steady for two weeks straight at a time, and then I’d take a week off, and they’d want me back. And

> then the next, it might be where we don't have money, or "we want you to do this, but the weather's looking pretty rough," you know?

This combination of his girlfriend's work and his piecework made things manageable: "So, I mean, things worked. We got by. We were never rich." Ryan eventually split with his girlfriend; for the last year, he has worked part-time stocking shelves at a grocery store for $7.50 an hour.

George is another man in the study who has worked most of his life but took one extended break from the labor force to help at home. George has almost always worked in customer service at grocery stores and other big box retailers. However, he never made much more than minimum wage, and he always has had the sense that there were limited paths of upward mobility for him: "I was not somebody they viewed as management material, and I think I'd hit the glass ceiling as far as somebody who was going to go without getting into management." After he went through a period of churning through several customer service jobs in short order, his wife—who worked for a nonprofit—suggested that he stay home. George, who said he "always had a close relationship with my kids," stayed home for about a year before returning to work, again in food service. Years later, George transitioned to manufacturing, having managed to get a job through a temp agency that became permanent. He makes $12.50 an hour, the most he has ever earned, with good benefits and opportunity for overtime.

For a couple of the elective nonparticipators, their employment histories include long stretches of unemployment that illustrate the sometimes-blurry line between unemployment and nonwork. Charles graduated from high school and attended a few years of college, working during the summers. However, when one of his parents was killed, he moved home and took eighteen months out of the labor force to grieve and be

close to family. He eventually finished his degree at a different university, but he said he looked for a job in his field for four years: “It was very stressful. I spent a lot time going on the internet. And a lot of time applying for jobs. I got very familiar with Monster dot com.” Living at home, Charles actively looked for work while working under-the-table: “You know, little gigs here and there, but, you know, like, ah, you know but, ah, nothing formal.” After years of searching, the best he could do was a telemarketing job about an hour’s drive away. Although he did not like the commute and it paid just $10.28 an hour, he worked the job for four and a half years before being let go in a mass layoff. He was on unemployment for eighteen months, again unsuccessful at finding work. He worked briefly in quality control, but said it “just wasn’t the right job for me.” He did some temp work and eventually worked for about a year for a temp agency itself, but again, he was let go and spent about a year looking for work: “I’ve been applying for jobs left and right around here. There’s, you know, there’s not too many jobs, but the job... you know, but when I last saw something that I thought I would be qualified for, I would apply.” At the time of the interview, Charles had just started a job for $9 an hour in a local manufacturing facility in a position he hoped would lead into management. Overall, Charles has spent more years unemployed than employed, although he claims to have been looking for work during all his years of unemployment. His more tenuous connection to the labor force stands in contrast to the elective participators, who show a pattern of long stretches of employment punctuated by discrete periods of nonwork.

Christian is another man in the study who has education, skills, and experience, yet he has been largely unsuccessful at finding work in northwestern Pennsylvania. He went to a trade school after high school but got impatient for income and left school for a

factory job just before earning his degree. When he was laid off from the factory, he enlisted in the military, serving in the Air Force for four years. Through an Air Force connection, he got a good civilian job in Virginia after his discharge that took him all over the world. During his time in the service, he got romantically involved with a woman from home. She lived with him in Virginia for a time, but when they got pregnant with their first child, they wanted to be closer to home. Christian started working out of Erie, the closest town to home with an international airport, but management changed and required all employees to work out of Virginia. Christian commuted for a time, but when their second child was on the way, he quit and they moved back to their hometown. The time since moving back has been much more uncertain. While his wife had a good job, he took about three years out of the labor force to be a stay-at-home dad and use his GI Bill to earn a degree online. His first foray into the local labor force was as a self-employed electrician for a time, but he found he did not like the collections side of the job and left that work after about eighteen months. From there, Christian was hired as an electrician at a local manufacturing plant, where he worked for a couple years. He was recruited away by another manufacturer, only to have them lay him off after a short time, a decision about which he never learned the reason: "I asked for an explanation. They don't need to give me one. It's a right-to-work or state or whatever that is." Unemployed and drawing unemployment insurance for the last four months, Christian—at age 41—is again looking for work. While he has worked more consistently than Charles, his time out of the labor force and bouts with unemployment give his labor force history certain characteristics of marginal men, to whom I now turn.

Marginal Men

A small group of the men in this study—about 10 percent—have labor force histories that qualify them as marginal men, meaning they have been marginally attached to the labor force over time. These men often have long gaps of unemployment or nonwork, but it is less clear when compared with the elective nonparticipators that these men are looking for work or would take a job if one were available. While these men have held jobs, usually their periods of employment are short-lived. Of all the men in this study, this group mostly closely resembles the working-class men discussed in a recent piece by Edin et al. (2019) as having tenuous attachments to the institutions of work, family, and religion. Additionally, although other men in this study have had traumatic and unfortunate circumstances, the stories of the marginal men seem particularly beset with trauma. Yet even this relatively small group is not homogeneous when it concerns their reasons for nonparticipation in the labor force.

Gabe graduated from high school in 2009, and in the nine years since, he has worked a total of about fifteen months across three different employers. Living at home, it took him about five years after high school to get his first job: "So, the employment thing stayed that way for a while, even after that, because by that point, I'm putting in applications and stuff, and who's gonna hire a 23-year-old with no experience?" About one year of his work experience has been with Wal-Mart, divided between two different six-month stints. The first time, he said he "worked there for five, six months and started having panic attacks and um, so that's, that ended that." He got a second chance, but he violated their attendance policy by missing too many days, so he was let go. Gabe has battled depression, which he described in some detail:

> I don't know, I just never have been on any pills, I just kind of worked myself out of it over time. And thing about depression, it never goes away, it will always be there, it's just a matter of do you fight it, or do you let it take over? And most days, I fight it. Most days I can get a handle on it, it's just every so often, it just sneaks in. It's manageable. Depression is manageable without pills, it can be done. But it's just not a lot of people have that support system to help them either. I had, the first time I didn't really have much of a support system, so that's why it took so long. The second time… I had people around me that wanted to talk to me, that wanted, I had a pretty decent-sized support system. It honestly does help to have people to talk to or people who will listen. It's so helpful, and I'm really grateful for that, they helped me out of a really dark spot.

When asked about his periods of unemployment, Gabe says that his understanding with his Mom, who works a demanding job, is that he keeps house when he is not earning anything: "Keep the dishes clean, make sure the laundry is done, cook dinner once and a while." But he also watches a lot of TV, which he connects with his depression: "Um, uh the depression. A lot of sitting around the house watching whatever happened to be on TV. At one point, I had the TV line-up down, like for an eight-hour period on a weekday, because it was the same thing every day." At the time of the interview, Gabe had been working part-time for a chain store for a few months, earning minimum wage. He likes the atmosphere at the store, describing it as "a family-style deal" when compared with Wal-Mart's "military-like deal", where managers treat you like you're an app". He likes his co-workers and finds the job fulfilling:

> The people are friendly, and um, I feel like to you can't have fun with your co-workers, you're not in the right place. But that's part of what keeps the job interesting, is uh, being able to have fun with your co-workers. But um, just uh getting to help people out, and uh watching the people smile. I like seeing people smile. So, like having, having them come through my line, and be like, "Did you find everything okay today?" And "Okay, sure. Thanks," and then they smile and walk out the door, and I'm like, "Cool." That's nice, I like that.

Like Gabe, Adrian and Jeff are in their mid-twenties and have struggled to attach to the labor force. Originally from the American southwest, Adrian, 24, did three

semesters of community college before dropping out. For about the next five years, his main job to speak of was as a delivery driver for Pizza Hut, which lasted about a year-and-a-half. He had a very short stint trying to sell knives door to door, but it was only for commission and was not a good fit for his introverted personality. He moved to northwestern Pennsylvania after meeting someone from the area through online gaming. Most recently, Adrian worked a seasonal job in a warehouse, but that ended five months ago. His situation had grown increasingly precarious: he is living at a boarding house but has no ability to pay, so he is contemplating selling his car or living in it:

> I mean, I'm trying to sell my car and I'm trying to get work, but like right now, is one of those times where I'm not in the comfortable part. I feel like someone's breathing down my neck all the time. I really am trying to get work but nothing's biting yet. So truthfully, I don't know either—I figure either I sell the car and I get the rent paid or I get kicked out and live in the car, so.

He describes himself as anti-social, which affects his interest seeking work: "I don't like being in crowds, I don't like being around people. And going out and getting work is going around people and not hiding in your room." With no interest in returning home and few local connections, Adrian's immediate future is uncertain.

Jeff, 26, had an early life marked by family trauma. His parents divorced when he was young, and his step-dad was later severely injured and become abusive, ultimately going to prison for attacking a family friend when Jeff's mother fled the home with the kids. As an adult, Jeff's sometimes volatile relationships with his family has made his residential history unstable, often moving back and forth among different family members. Like Gabe and Adrian, Jeff has struggled to stay attached to the labor force. In his first years after high school, he worked temp jobs on-and-off, which he followed with stints at Wal-Mart, a factory, and a couple short-lived manual jobs. He admits, "Yeah,

I've bounced around way too much." His current stretch of unemployment has lasted nine months, and there is no evidence he is actively looking for work. Living with the parents of a friend, he receives food stamps and medical coverage but has no cash income, aside from "random times" when he does odd jobs for cash.

A few of the marginal men have children, which further complicates their situations. Cody has lived what he termed a "transient" life. Raised in the Northeastern United States, he has mainly worked in construction, which has taken him to New Orleans, Alabama, and later, Pennsylvania. His lifestyle was unconventional, which included partying and drugs, but he always managed to make a living and provide for himself: "I can put a roof on a house, outside the house I can build additions, I've done concrete work, everything. Anything to make a buck, man." His situation changed when he fell for a woman when living in northwestern Pennsylvania and they found themselves pregnant: "You know, which I wasn't planning, I wasn't practicing safe sex with her, I wasn't thinking right." For the first year of their child's life, they lived with her parents. But according to Cody, the mother of his child went on a drug-fueled binge and is currently incarcerated. Having moved out from the parents of his ex-girlfriend but without work or support, Cody and his son were recently evicted from their apartment: "I looked up there and it was like bags and bags and bags of shit, and it's all my shit." Cody and his son have found temporary respite living with a friend, but the future is uncertain. Having last worked "about a year and a half ago", Cody has struggled to balance child care and work: "I have nobody to babysit." He admits he is struggling.

Finally, a couple of the marginal men seem to more actively spurn traditional employment in favor of alternative visions of work and sustenance. Keith, just 22, has

already had a couple long stretches of unemployment since graduating high school, totaling about two-and-a-half years. Keith has never had a driver's license, which limits the scope of his employment prospects, although he says he diligently applies to all the places he can. In addition to working a couple food service jobs, he has tried manual labor, selling knives, and reselling items online. But Keith strikes a critical note about his experiences with conventional employment, expressing his desire to eventually live sustainably:

> But, uh, I always felt like I was in a hamster wheel. Uh, it just felt like, um, I see where the money goes, in a general sense, it seems like it all goes to a very small group of people. It seems like, no matter where you spend your money, no matter where it's going, it's going to, you know, this guy owns this company and this guy owns this company, but there is a guy above them who probably owns all of it. It's – you know, they say a trickledown economy or whatever, but I just didn't – I don't see it like that. And so, I always thought, "Man, if I just worked really hard for myself, you know, I always thought it would go a lot further… you need to just nonstop work, work, work, work, and it's a lot of work. You're doing a whole lot of stuff. Uh, and I thought, you know, if you were – if you were just doing that in your own yard and doing – in your own land, it would be something completely different. And – and, uh, oh, man, that's a – so, that's – that's – that's my view on – on, you know, what – what you're getting out of the work in the current economy. Here, it's – it's, uh, whew, it's – you're not – your work you put in it, it does not seem to be – to be worth – worth, uh, the money, you know? So, I don't know, I don't know, uh, exactly how I am going to get to my goal, but my goal is to own my own plot of land, with people sustaining off of our own self-sustaining economy, you know? Grow our own food, have our own animals, uh, the whole nine yards, there's plenty more than that.

Keith currently lives at home, which he also seeks to recast as an opportunity to help his parents:

> But my parents are kind enough to have me at the house for now, and so that, um – I notice that there's an idea that is put in everybody's heads which is that you're a bum if you live in your parents' house, but I also look at it as in, well, my parents are also getting up there.

Keith continues to look for work, but he is also content gardening with his father and helping around the house. He says his needs are simple, and he is happy: "I have no

source of income, and I am not a needy person, I don't spend money, like, on stuff. Like, I don't need money to be happy, you know?"

Carl, 31, also marches to the beat of his own drummer. In the dozen or so years since high school, Carl has rarely held a conventional job for any length of time, something to which he readily admits: "I've always had trouble keeping a job of sorts that you have to be here for this X amount of time." He explains, "I daydream a lot. So, it's hard for me to be stuck in a place." Calling himself a "young hippy", Carl expresses little interest in conventional employment. Carl's lifestyle has been enabled by having a free place to stay that is owned by his working-class parents. When he needs money, he finds odd jobs or does tattoos and piercings. His attempts to attach to the labor force have been complicated by a long-standing addiction to opioids, although he says he has been clean for about a year. Recently a new father, Carl still seems unconcerned with the future. When asked his plans, he says he doesn't even know what he is doing later today, let alone years down the road. He adds, "I think it's easier for my life to do that." Echoing Keith, the closest thing to a plan Carl mentions is to one day have "a little farm-type deal" with chickens, bees, and a garden. For now, he is content to go where the wind blow and "just get rid of things, things, things, things."

Chronic Churning

Almost half of the men in this study had at least one spell of chronic nonparticipation at some point since high school. As discussed at length above, the reasons for these spells vary: some pursued education or training; some qualified for disability benefits; some had battles with substance abuse; and some elected to leave the

formal labor force for a period of time. Yet perhaps as important as why men leave the labor force is whether or not they return, something less detectable in the rotating panel design of the CPS. In this study, by virtue of having the full labor force narratives of these men, I can not only provide a fuller context for these decisions to leave the labor force, I can track whether men reenter the labor force after extended exits. Table 3 lists the 28 men in the study with a period of chronic nonparticipation after high school. These men are grouped by labor force status at the time of the interview: not in the labor force (NILF); unemployed; working part-time; or working full-time. Recall that unemployment here is used as the BLS defines it: not working but actively looking for work, such that these unemployed men would be considered part of the labor force. Within these four labor force categories, men are arranged by their tenure at their current job in ascending order.

There are three important findings in this table. First, of the 28 men in this sample who had at least one period of chronic nonparticipation, all but six were in the labor force at the time of the interview, evidence that even extended labor force exits are often not permanent. This challenges notions—implicit or explicit—that the categories of worker and nonworker are fixed or that nonworkers rarely reenter the labor force. I label this phenomenon *chronic churning*. This finding complements the discovery of the "in-and-outs" (Coglianese 2017), and together, these findings suggest that a full accounting of declining labor force participation must consider the movement of men in and out of the labor force, some for relatively short periods ("in-and-outs") and others for longer spells ("chronic churners"). The second finding is that many of the men who have returned to formal work after an extended labor force exit have shown longstanding labor force

attachment. In Table 2, not only have many chronic nonparticipators returned to the labor force, they have persisted in work: 16 of the 19 men with a job have been at their position for at least one year, and 10 of the 17 have been at their job for at least five years, which is additional evidence that extended labor force exits are not fatal to men's work aspirations. Third, as denoted by the asterisks, eight of the 28 chronic nonparticipators are current or former recipients of some form of disability benefits. While we saw earlier in the chapter that disability is one reasons for chronic labor force exits, it is notable that more than half of the men who currently receive disability also are in the labor force, an indication that disability benefits are not synonymous with complete labor force dropout.

Table 2.3: Current Labor Force Status of Chronic Nonparticipators (N = 28)

Name	Age at Time of Interview	Labor Force Status at Time of Interview	Tenure at Current Job or in Current Status
Jeff	26	NILF	10 months
Cody	37	NILF	1.5 years
Richard*	35	NILF	1.5 years
Trevor*	41	NILF	3 years
Frank	22	NILF	4 years
Jared*	43	NILF	6 years
Brandon*	35	Unemployed	1 month
Christian	41	Unemployed	5 months
Victor	40	Unemployed	10 months
Gabe	27	Part-time	3 months
Kyle	29	Part-time	8 months
Evan	28	Part-time	1 year
Ryan	26	Part-time	1 year
Carl	31	Part-time	1 year
Brad*	37	Part-time	1.5 years
William*	39	Part-time	2.5 years
Patrick**	39	Part-time	5 years
Charles	39	Full-time	6 weeks
Jeremy	39	Full-time	4 years
Sam	37	Full-time	5 years
Jeremiah	38	Full-time	5 years
George	40	Full-time	6 years
Seth	40	Full-time	6 years
Alex	43	Full-time	6 years
Curtis**	33	Full-time	7 years
Dennis	33	Full-time	9 years
Zach	43	Full-time	11 years
Dustin	46	Full-time	15 years

* Indicates current receipt of disability benefits
** Indicates former receipt of disability benefits

Unemployment Insurance as Livelihood Strategy

One theme that emerged among these cases is the role of unemployment insurance (UI) as a livelihood strategy for the men in this study. Economists have long studied UI, and there is consensus that while UI is an important feature of modern welfare states, it represents a trade-off between consumption smoothing for unemployed workers and the moral hazard of increasing unemployment by discouraging job search (Landais, Michaillat, and Saez 2018; Schmieder and Von Wachter 2016). Previous work on UI in the sociological literature has been scarcer. In her study of how members of a mill town cope with poverty in rural California ("Golden Valley"), Sherman finds that "a large proportion of local men" (2006: 898) receive unemployment insurance, driven by the seasonal nature of the dominant industries. While technically government assistance, UI is perceived as earned income by her respondents and does not have the stigma of other forms of assistance, such as welfare or even disability. UI is less likely to be a strategy for the extremely poor (Edin and Shaefer 2015), who do not have enough attachment to the formal labor force to qualify for benefits. Recent work shows that the populations receiving SSDI and UI are largely non-overlapping (Mueller, Rothstein, and Von Wachter 2016), meaning that an investigation of UI is different in kind than one of SSDI.

Although the work of men in this study is less seasonal than it was for Sherman's respondents in Golden Valley, UI was still common: at least one-third of the men have drawn UI at least once, with many men drawing it multiple times. Perhaps more important than its presence is the way in which UI was used strategically by both employees and employers. Several men in this study used their time on UI to pursue

education or training rather than immediately look for work. Dan took a voluntary layoff from his warehouse job and used the time on UI to earn his Commercial Driver's License (CDL). Drawing UI allowed Dustin not to have to work while he was in school as an x-ray technician: "I was able to collect unemployment almost the whole two years that I went to school." As we saw earlier in the chapter, Gary drew UI after a layoff and enrolled in a nurse's training program, although his benefits ran out unexpectedly before he completed the training, pushing him back into the labor force without the credential: "That's cruel. I'm trying to better myself."

Several men drew UI after being discharged from the military. Justin drew UI for six months after getting out of the Army: "I actually had 6 months of unemployment that I totally utilized because I actually made more on unemployment than I did the year I was in Afghanistan." He said it would have been irresponsible for him not to take the benefit: "But...it would have been irresponsible for me to find a job around here until that [the UI] was gone, so when that was gone, I got a job at [a fast food restaurant] and went to school." He said he took a big pay cut moving from his UI based on his military pay to his fast food work. Austin also drew UI for six months after his discharge:

> So, I was starting up college, but, uh, I got called into the unemployment office in August, and they were nice, and they – they – I – I was impressed with the unemployment office, and there was, like, six or seven of us sitting there, and everybody was like, "Well, you guys have to start a re-training program or some sort of education." I was like, "I start college in two weeks." [They said], "Get out of here."

Like Justin, Austin noted that between the UI and his GI Bill benefit, he was making more after discharge than he did while he was enlisted. And Dennis also drew UI after his military service: "I actually – the first – I think the first six months I was out of the Marines, I actually collected unemployment, you know, I'm eligible for that."

Employers also used UI strategically. As mentioned, rather than do full layoffs, Nick's employer, a local manufacturer, asked workers to work every other week when business was slow. As Nick explained,

> I worked there for four years. They started going downhill. It was kind of, you know, an economy thing. They were getting less business, less jobs that we were actually doing work for. So, they asked us to take a... it wasn't a full layoff. It was every other week. So, when we work for a week and was laid off for a week. I'd get a regular paycheck from working. I'd collect an unemployment check. It's every other week like that for a while.

The precarity eventually led Nick to get his CDL and pursue a different career. Jeff, a union carpenter, draws UI in between his union job assignments, which allows him to complete continuing education related to his trade but also allows some rest and relaxation:

> Um, I think my, my biggest amount of time being laid off uh I think was probably three or four weeks, and I absolutely loved it. If, if you have other things to do, it's the perfect time. I mean you still have about half the money you see on your check coming in, which is nice.

Another union member, Seth, was laid off for about a year, during which time he collected unemployment insurance and took advantage of the Trade Adjustment Assistance program.[31] He said, "when I got laid off it was the perfect time for me to get laid off, because I knew I was gonna be collecting unemployment." Seth used the time to get additional training, worked under-the-table, and collected UI until he was called back to work by his employer.

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31 See https://www.uc.pa.gov/unemployment-benefits/federal/Pages/Trade-Adjustment-Assistance-2009-(TAA).aspx.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, UI also enabled some men in the study to have extended spells outside the formal labor force. Informal employment has long been a focus of rural scholars (McGranahan 2003), and for many men in this study, UI (and to a lesser degree, disability benefits) allowed them to combined formal and informal approaches. Jeremy had two extended stints outside of formal work, both initiated by a layoff and qualification for UI. The jobs from which Jeremy was let go paid only slightly more than the minimum wage, so when Jeremy combined his UI with under-the-table work, he was making roughly the same money for a fraction of the time, which further incentivized him to maintain the arrangement. Charles has also had long stretches of unemployment where he has drawn UI and worked under-the-table construction while looking for formal work. While men appreciated having the income from UI, there was still the reality of needing to make a relatively little money goa long way. As Seth described his time on UI:

> You know, if you had bills to pay and you know, the rent was due when you only had 60 bucks in your pocket, the mind's turning. What can I do? Can I go split some firewood? Sure. Can I go do this? Yeah, okay. You know, there's a whole bunch of old tin laying at the camp, and let's haul that in for scrap, you know.

An issue that underlies most of these cases concerns the fact that an active job search is an on-going requirement of maintaining unemployment insurance benefits[32], thus meaning any person on UI is technically in the labor force when receiving the benefit. However, as we have seen in the cases of many of the men in this study, employment and unemployment situations are often complex. While some men very

32 For current requirements of the Pennsylvania unemployment insurance program, see https://eligibility.com/unemployment/pennsylvania-pa-unemployment-benefits, although it should be noted that the men in this study have drawn UI at different times when rules might have varied.

adamant about their sustained, genuine job search effort while on UI, other men suggested they were less diligent. As Alex said, "I would collect unemployment and I wasn't really rushing to get a job." Justin, the veteran who drew UI for six months after his discharge, said he "didn't do much" during that period. And Victor, who was let go from a good job when the company closed its local branch, saw his time on UI as a bit of a reward for having experienced the layoff: "I had unemployment kind of as a, 'I've been through this, whatever, I'm just going to take it easy.'" As he admitted, "In my personal opinion, once you get into the unemployment part of it, it makes it really hard to go back to work." For many men, there is a tradeoff when drawing UI. For men who are only likely to earn low wages in the formal labor market, the combination of UI and under-the-table work creates a financial disincentive to return. For men who were earning more when they were laid off, there is less incentive to leave for UI for a low-wage job when it might not be more than they get on UI from a higher-paying job. As Victor explained, "I've been able to put some money aside, so I'm like, "What's the point of going to work somewhere for $20,000, $10 an hour, whatever the case is?" Victor actively looked for work during his time on UI, but he was not willing to give up UI for just any job. He turned down several job offers while on UI that were not up to his standards.

Several men talked at great length about how they navigated the state's employment system during their time receiving UI benefits. Victor described needing to show adequate work effort using the state's online system:

> You know, you have to go through their Keystone job site or whatever and apply for a few jobs there, or – and then, once they – they see that you're making some kind of, uh, initiative, then they just kind of put you along. And then, if they audit you, "Hey, I applied for this job and that job and this job."

As mentioned, Victor applied for jobs and even turned down offers, but it did not make sense to him to leave the program except for a worthwhile opportunity. In fact, it took Victor several months after his UI had run out to find the type of job he wanted, but he had saved money and his wife was working, so he was glad he waited for the right opportunity. Similarly, Seth demonstrates the ambiguity of the job search in this extended exchange:

> Seth: Yeah. I, I floated for at least a year and a half.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah. And then –
>
> Seth: Could be closer to two. But I floated. I took full advantage of the, you know, they kept offering all the extensions for the unemployment. All I had to do a search for work, but nobody was hiring. I mean I had to… I had to do three job searches every week. I did some in person. I had to keep in touch with the CareerLink. And they had me take some classes there to help me out too. When I originally got laid off [from my most recent job], I had to do all the stuff at CareerLink. When I got laid off the first time [from a previous employer], I didn't have to do nothing.
>
> Interviewer: Oh really?
>
> Seth: I just called in, job search, write it all on a piece of paper. You know I kept track of all that because I knew if something when haywire they were gonna ask me, "Where did you search for jobs July 10 through July 17?" I know. But I kept a nice ledger and I kept all my stuff.
>
> Interviewer: So you had to show some, but –
>
> Seth: Sure. Oh, I was looking for work. If I would've found a job somewhere, anywhere that was gonna pay somewhat decent, I was gonna take it, you know. I mean I fished a lot and I, I traveled. I worked with [a friend]… like a month straight restoring houses.
>
> Interviewer: Nice, yeah.
>
> Seth: I did take advantage of a little bit of the cash under the table deal, but as long as it was under like five grand, I guess it's kinda okay. At least you can stick by that.

Dennis, the Marine who drew UI after his discharge, described how even unemployment staff themselves helped him navigate the system:

> So, and then, like, the unemployment office was real good with me, and they're like, "Well, what do you got going on?" I'm like, "Well, I'm in college." They're like, "Okay, well, thank you for your service, you know, as long as you kind of apply for a couple of jobs once in a while, we're okay with it." I'm like, "Okay."

Dennis used savings from his time in the military, his GI Bill, and six months of UI to go back to technical college, earning his associate degree in eighteen months.

This demonstration of the blurriness of the job search as also plays into the primary topic of this chapter, namely the investigation into rising rates of nonwork among prime-age men. Technically, someone would be considered in the labor force when receiving unemployment insurance, but as we have seen, a person's actual status can sometimes be less clear, regardless of what determination the BLS might make about the situation of any particular case in a given month. While these men expressed some level of conscientiousness about how they were handling the UI system, there is also evidence among some men that they were adept at doing what it took to maintain appearances so as not to jeopardize their benefits.

There is reason to suspect that similar pressure exists when men, for example, answer the questions of survey researchers about their employment status. This is underscored by Jeremy, who had two extended spells out of the labor force during which he drew some UI and worked under-the-table. He admitted being uneasy about his time out of the labor force, which suggests that nonwork remains at least somewhat socially unacceptable contrary to claims otherwise by some observers of declining labor force participation (Eberstadt 2016; Murray 2012). The following exchange not only

demonstrates the desire to save face with family during these spells of unemployment, but sensitivity to maintaining compliance in the eyes of the state:

> Interviewer: Yeah, okay. So, so if someone had, if someone had asked you during that two years if you were working, what would you, how would you have answered?
>
> Jeremy: Depends on the individual that asked.
>
> Interviewer: Okay, who would you have said yes to and who would you have said no to?
>
> Jeremy: Friends, family I would tell them that I was working part-time. But when it came to like, we'll say, CareerLink, I was unemployed.
>
> Interviewer: Okay, so if like a government worker had called you and said, "are you working," you would have said no?
>
> Jeremy: Correct.

Conclusion

The declining labor force participation rate among prime-age men has been an empirical and policy puzzle for many years, and in this chapter, I have asked with many others, "Where have all the workers gone?" (Eberstadt 2016; Krueger 2017). Using the lifetime labor force narratives of 61 working-class men in rural Pennsylvania, I explore the ways in which these men move in and out of the labor force over time. First, I identify the phenomenon of *chronic churning*, in which men leave the labor force for one year or more yet reenter the labor force. This finding complements the discovery of the "in-and-outs" (Coglianese 2017), and together, these findings suggest that a full accounting of declining labor force participation must consider the movement of men in and out of the labor force over time. Rather than a labor force composed of two classes of men with

distinct characteristics—workers and nonworkers—the prevalence of chronic churning suggests that labor force dropout is not confined to a small number of men, but that it has become part of way men navigate the labor market in the twenty-first century. Chronic churning also shows that extended periods of labor force nonparticipation are not fatal to work aspiration, and even extended labor force disconnection is usually not permanent, even for reasons of disability or substance abuse. Overall, chronic churning paints a picture of the labor force experiences of working-class men as more dynamic than previously understood, where the line between work and nonwork is often less clear than survey research suggests.

Second, using the benefit of the extended labor force narratives of 61 working-class men, I offer context for why men leave the labor force, especially when they do so for longer periods of time. I find four reasons why men leave the labor force: education and training, substance abuse, disability benefits, and elective nonparticipation, in which men elect to leave for a period of time but eventually return. An important first step in addressing labor force dropout is a deeper understanding of the proximate reasons why men leave work. A theme across these cases, regardless of the reason for dropping out of the formal labor force, is that nonparticipation in the labor force, even for reasons of disability, does not always mean nonwork. Whether in the formal labor force or not, all men need to support themselves, and in some cases, their families. Yet while most of the men in this study work most of the time, there is also a small group of men—about ten percent of the cases—who are marginally attached to the labor force. Some of these men show little interest in work, while others more actively reject certain cultural norms around work. I explore how these men understand their identities vis-à-vis the changing

nature of work in Chapter 5, but for the next two chapters, I turn to how men seek to improve their labor market prospects (Chapter 3) and how some men still manage to find "good jobs" (Chapter 4).

CHAPTER 3: MOVING ON UP? HOW AND WHY RURAL, WORKING-CLASS MEN DO—AND DON'T—SEEK TO IMPROVE THEIR LABOR MARKET PROSPECTS

The growth of "bad jobs" for men without a college degree has been well-documented. Numerous studies—both quantitative and qualitative—have described dismal job prospects for low- and middle-skill workers, including low wages, few opportunities for wage growth or advancement, few benefits, and low job security (Autor 2011; Autor and Dorn 2009; Chen 2015; Kalleberg 2009, 2011; Newman 2009; Silva 2013). Men without a college degree are particularly vulnerable in today's labor market because of declining job availability and job quality in the manufacturing sector, leading to stagnant or falling wages (Morris and Western 1999; Pilat et al. 2006). The decrease in manufacturing has been accompanied by the rapid growth of the service sector, where jobs traditionally have had lower wages and fewer benefits as compared with manufacturing (Autor and Dorn 2009). The challenge facing working-class men is particularly acute in rural places, where employment opportunities have generally been worse than in urban America (Slack 2007) and where wage growth continues to be slower (Cromartie 2017).

Despite this dismal outlook, men with less than a college degree are not without recourse to improve their situations. Rational choice theory predicts that men facing poor employment prospects or low wages will seek to improve their situations. In particular, there are three primary ways men might attempt to improve their labor market position: 1) by *upskilling*, meaning getting additional education or training, thus making themselves more employable or more competitive for better jobs; 2) by *geographic*

mobility, or moving to an area where jobs are more plentiful or of better quality, a tactic especially applicable for men living in rural areas with limited opportunities; and 3) by *occupational flexibility*, or taking jobs not traditionally done by men, such as in female-dominated occupations like care work. Researchers and policymakers have stressed these paths of employment uplift, yet available evidence suggests that men have largely been resistant to these avenues of social mobility (Austin et al. 2018; Bound and Holzer 2000; Doar, Holzer, and Orrell 2017; Ganong and Shoag 2017), although the reasons why are less understood.

This chapter explores the ways in which rural, working-class men do—and do not—seek to improve their labor market position. With the benefit of the full educational and labor force narratives of 61 working-class men in rural Pennsylvania, I paint a robust picture of what men are—and are not—doing to improve their earning potential, including the reasons some men are not pursuing the strategies academics and policymakers think they should. While much existing work on this topic focuses on *outcomes*—such as whether or not low-employment men complete a credential, move, or take a nontraditional job—the narratives on which this chapter are based allow me to also show *process*, such as when someone starts a credential but does not finish, moves away but returns, or takes preliminary steps toward a nontraditional job but does not follow through. The evidence presented in this chapter shows that men are often doing more to improve their labor market position than outcome-based accounts allow, which demonstrates an agency among less-educated men previously underappreciated. First, I find that a majority of men in this study have pursued some sort of postsecondary education or training; however, rather than pursuing post-secondary education as a means

of economic uplift, I find that this is often a means of vocational discernment for men who are not afforded the same space to explore careers as their college-going peers. Yet even though men use education and training to explore, they are still practically-minded about their post-secondary plans, quick to abandon paths that they do not see as leading to employment. And for both employees and employers, there is reason to suspect that certain training or credentialing may prove less valuable in rural places where an ability to do the job is more important than credentials on paper. Second, despite evidence that Americans in general are moving less for work (Austin et al. 2018; Ganong and Shoag 2017), the men in this study often took one of a set of what I call *mobility measures* to improve their labor market opportunities, such as enlisting in the military, taking jobs that require travel, or moving away for brief periods on what I call *prospecting trips* in which men move without a job in search of better opportunities. I also find that men who attempt a *mobility measure* are usually drawn back to the area by several factors, including the "stickiness" of rural place and obligations to custodial and noncustodial children. Finally, I find that while few men have worked nontraditional jobs, many more have considered such jobs and even taken preliminary steps toward such work. This said, the few men in this study who are in female-dominated occupations testify to resistance from family and peers, indicating that certain cultural barriers remain entrenched. Given the cultural cost in switching to female-dominated careers and the availability of at least some blue-collar work that pays well, it may take even more time and further decimation of less-skilled, male-dominated occupations to push more men into female-dominated jobs.

Literature Review

The Decline in Job Quality for Low- and Middle-Skill Men

Over the past few decades, a series of economic changes have resulted in a different employment landscape, especially for low- and middle-skill men. The American labor market has been marked by a decrease in middle-skill jobs (Jaimovich and Siu 2012); a decline in routine occupations, which tend to be middle-skill (Albanesi et al. 2013; Autor, Levy, and Murnane 2003); and a polarization between good and bad jobs (Acemoglu and Autor 2011; Kalleberg 2011). The result is an economy in which precarity and insecurity have increased for many workers (Cooper 2014; Hacker 2008; Kalleberg 2009; Silva 2013). These changes have been particularly acute for low- and middle-skilled workers, who have experienced a reduction in wages relative to other groups (Council of Economic Advisers 2016). Manufacturing and production, which have traditionally been a source of good-paying work for less-educated men, have lost jobs in recent decades (Acemoglu et al. 2016; Autor et al. 2014; Kalleberg 2011; Morris and Western 1999; Osterman 2014; Pierce and Schott 2016). Meanwhile, lower-paying jobs in the service sector have proliferated (Autor and Dorn 2013). The United States lost 30 percent of its manufacturing jobs between 1998 and 2016 (Bhattarai 2016), and more than 80 percent of all private jobs are now in the service sector (Casselman 2016). The result is a relative decrease in secure, semi-skilled, middle-income jobs (Bresnahan et al. 2002; Freeman and Katz 2007; Katz and Murphy 1992; Krueger 1993; Levy and Murnane 1992; Tüzemen and Willis 2013; Wright and Dwyer 2003).

The reasons for these economic changes are varied and debated. Skill-biased technological change has depressed wages for occupations that require manual or routine

labor (Autor, Katz, and Kearney 2008; Goldin and Katz 1998b), a phenomenon concentrated in industries most exposed to foreign competition and international trade (Autor, Dorn, and Gordon H Hanson 2013), particularly expanded trade with China (Acemoglu et al. 2016; Autor et al. 2014; Pierce and Schott 2016). These pressures of global competition have lead employers to seek to lower labor costs, including by moving operations to lower-wage countries (Kalleberg 2009). Employers have also increasingly moved away from standard employment arrangements to those characterized by employee flexibility and reduced wages and benefits (Benner 2008; Gordon 1996; Katz and Krueger 2016; Osterman 2014). And even though manufacturing employment has been rising again since about 2010, the return of production has not meant the return of jobs, as technology replaces low-skill workers (Acemoglu and Restrepo 2017; Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014). The concurrent decimation of private sector unions since the 1970s as the "core equalizing institution" vis-à-vis corporate actors (Rosenfeld 2014) has meant increased income inequality (Kollmeyer 2018) and a decline in the value of the minimum wage (Card 2001), which also hurts nonunion workers (Western and Rosenfeld 2011).

These changes have extracted a large cost for low- and middle-skill men. Real male earnings today are lower than in the 1970s (Greenstone and Looney 2011b; Mishel et al. 2012), and among full-time, full-year male workers, all but college-educated men have experienced double-digit decreases in inflation-adjusted mean earnings since 1969 (Greenstone and Looney 2011b). Job quality has also declined: the adequacy of employer-sponsored health insurance benefits has decreased (Collins, Gunja, and Doty 2017); there is less job stability for men (Hollister 2011); and there has been a growth in

involuntary part-time jobs (Glauber 2017) and a large decrease in the share of men working full-time (Greenstone and Looney 2011b) or looking for work at all (Abraham and Kearney 2018; Council of Economic Advisors 2016).

The declining job prospects that low- and middle-skill men have faced over the last four decades further deteriorated during the Great Recession, which began in 2008 (Hout, Levanon, and Cumberworth 2011). Recessions are typically characterized by significant income losses, high unemployment, investment losses, high rates of home foreclosures, and declines in credit availability. The recessionary period between the end of 2007 and 2009 has been identified as the worst financial shock in the United States since the Great Depression of the 1930s and is widely referred to as the "Great Recession" (Hout, Levanon, Cumberworth, et al. 2011). The unemployment rate was about double the pre-recession rate, hovering at 5.0 percent in January of 2008 and climbing to 9-10% in 2009 through 2011 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018). Home foreclosures were exceptionally high (Grusky, Western, and Wimer 2011). While job loss and unemployment were widespread for workers across the educational spectrum (Kroft et al. 2015), no demographic group of American workers was as adversely affected by the recession as less-educated males, especially young men (Sum et al. 2011). One of the reasons why low- and middle-skill men were more adversely affected during the Great Recession was because of declines in industries that have traditionally employed these men, including manufacturing and construction (Goodman and Mance 2011). Goods-producing industries usually experience the largest declines in employment during recessions, and the Great Recession was no different, with construction and manufacturing both experiencing their largest percentage declines of the post-WWII era

(Barker 2011; Goodman and Mance 2011). Construction was among the hardest hit industries, as both residential and nonresidential construction declined rapidly during the recession (Hadi 2011).

Upwardly Mobile Pathways in Today's Labor Market

Despite the focus on labor market polarization and the decline in job quality for low- and middle-skill men, there are ways for men with less than a four-year college degree to improve their labor market position short of earning a bachelor's degree. The three tactics most prominent in literature on employment are 1) *upskilling*, the addition of skills and credentials; 2) *geographic mobility*, the willingness to move to places where jobs are more plentiful or of better quality; and 3) *occupational flexibility*, taking jobs in occupations or industries not traditional to one's personal characteristics.

Upskilling

Contrary to pessimism about the availability of jobs for those with less than a four-year college degree, there is evidence of the existence of a robust middle-skill job market[33] (Autor 2015; Burrowes et al. 2014; Holzer and Lerman 2007, 2009). Holzer and Lerman (2007) estimate that approximately half of all jobs as of 2006 were middle-skill, with projections that demand for middle-skill jobs will remain robust into the future. They show that the traditional middle of the job market—composed primarily of

33 Middle-skill jobs are those that require more than a high school degree, but less than a four-year bachelor's degree.

construction, production, and clerical jobs that require little education—has indeed been declining rapidly. But another set of middle-skill jobs—in health care, mechanical maintenance and repair, and some services—that require some postsecondary education or training is consistently growing, as are skill needs within traditionally unskilled jobs (Autor 2015; Holzer 2015b; Holzer and Lerman 2007, 2009). Men with more education are more likely to be in the labor force (Burke 2017), and even among men who have a high school degree or less, past research has shown that a substantial percentage of these workers are able to move out of low-wage jobs and into better ones over the course of their career (Andersson, Holzer, and Lane 2005; Newman 2006a).

The evidence is mixed about the roles of education and training in improving earnings for low- and middle-skill workers. Early research on the returns to vocational training within high school showed no effects, and past research shows few benefits for much sub-baccalaureate training (Dar and Gill 1998; Norton Grubb 1997). However, subsequent work has shown positive wage and employment effects of the vocational track (for a review, see Eichhorst et al. 2015), and some training programs lead to higher wages (for a review, see Holzer 2012). In particular, sector-based training, in which employers in a particular sector partner with training providers and intermediaries to link trained individuals with particular jobs, has shown wage increases for low-skilled men that persist over time (Hendra et al. 2016; Maguire et al. 2010). In general, while the evidence is inconclusive on training given the diversity of approaches, it is a durable finding that more formal education generally leads to higher lifetime earnings (Ma, Pender, and Welch 2016; Norton Grubb 1997), and the idea that less-educated and hard-

to-employ men should seek additional skills and training is common among academics and policy makers (Doar et al. 2017; Wessel 2016).

Geographic Mobility

While American history has been marked by many waves of migration—the Gold Rush, the Depression, postwar westward expansion, the Great Migrations of African Americans—evidence shows that both intra-county and intercounty migration rates have dropped significantly in recent decades (Austin et al. 2018), including migration to high-income areas (Ganong and Shoag 2017). Reasons for this slowdown are myriad[34] but include the high cost of housing in some areas (Glaeser and Saiz 2003) and land-use restrictions (Herkenhoff, Ohanian, and Prescott 2018). Yet despite these barriers to mobility, there is a still a sense among observers that less-educated men living in areas of limited employment opportunities would do well to move (Yglesias 2013), especially because regional income convergence has slowed (Berry and Glaeser 2005; Moretti 2011) and place-based nonparticipation in the labor force has become durable (Austin et al. 2018). There is evidence that the college-educated (Cadena and Kovak 2016; Wozniak 2010) and immigrants (Cadena and Kovak 2016) are much more willing to move for economic opportunities than non-graduates and non-immigrants, and there is a sense that those with skills and aspirations need to leave rural places in order to succeed (Carr and Kefalas 2009). From a policymaking perspective, some have proposed offering moving subsidies to help the long-term unemployed move to stronger labor markets (Strain

34 For a fuller discussion, see Austin, Glaeser, and Summers (2018).

2014), while others—conceding that most workers will not move—recommend place-based policies (Austin et al. 2018).

Occupational Flexibility

Despite some changes in gender differences in occupational employment over time (Wootton 1997), there remains a relatively high degree of gender difference in certain occupations (England 2010; Wootton 1997). Past research has shown that low- and middle-skill men are reluctant to enter female-dominated industries because of lower pay and prestige (England 2005; Gatta and Roos 2005; Simpson 2005), and leading gender theorists have argued that men's resistance to entering occupations staffed largely by women reflects the persistent devaluation of roles and activities that are seen as feminine (Peters and Dush 2010; Ridgeway and England 2007). This is despite the fact that men who enter so-called pink-collar jobs experience more job security and wage growth than in blue-collar work (Dill, Price-Glynn, and Rakovski 2016), and men generally have unseen advantages—"the glass escalator"—in female-dominated occupations (Williams 1992, 2013). Yet there is a cultural script within masculinity about the types of work "real men" do (and do not) do (Williams 2010), which makes adaptation to a changed labor market not just a case of sheer economics (Cherlin 2014). There is a tendency for workers to look for jobs like they used to have, not ones that currently exist (Kroft et al. 2015), which is in keeping with the idea that many men—especially white, working-class men—compare their labor market prospects less to the available options and more to the types of job their fathers and grandfathers held (Cherlin 2018), even if it means living in less optimal economic situations. For those men who do

work in traditionally-female jobs, there is evidence of role strain (Simpson 2005), but men also employ a variety of strategies to reestablish masculinity in those employment situations (Simpson 2004).

Findings and Analysis

In this section, I examine the degree to which men in this study have adopted strategies to improve their labor market position. In particular, I examine 1) whether men have sought additional skills and credentials; 2) if they have moved or traveled in search of better opportunities; and 3) the degree to which they have—or expressed a willingness—to take nontraditional jobs or work in female-dominated occupations. I find that most of the men in the study have attempted one or more of these strategies, although the reasons why challenge existing understandings of the motivations of rural, working-class men.

Upskilling

The most common of the labor market advancement strategies in this study is upskilling, which is any training or credentialing beyond a high school diploma or equivalent.[35] The highest level of educational attainment of the men in the study is displayed in Table 1. The modal level of highest educational attainment is a high school diploma or equivalent, which make up a little more than one-third of the cases; however,

35 Not included as upskilling for the purposes of this study is any on-the-job training, which imparts job skills but is not independently sought by the employee.

a plurality of the men in the study has attempted or completed post-secondary education or training. About one-fifth of the men in the study earned a credential; another one-fifth attended some college but failed to earn a degree; and another one-fifth earned an associate or bachelor's degree.[36] Only one man dropped out of high school and failed to return for his GED.

Table 3.1: Highest Educational Attainment

	Total (N = 61)	**Percent**
Less than high school	1	2
GED	3	5
High school diploma	18	30
Some training, no credential	1	2
Post-secondary credential (e.g. CDL)	13	21
Some college, no degree	11	18
Associate degree	7	11
Bachelor's degree	7	11
Total	61	100

Among those who earned credentials, the most common was a commercial driver's license (CDL), earned by five men. Three of the five acquired their CDL to do long-haul trucking, while the other two drive locally, defined as routes that do not require

36 As discussed at more length in Chapter 2, this set of cases—despite 20 percent having earned at least an associate degree—is still solidly working class: virtually all men come from a working-class background according to parental education and occupation; work in traditionally blue-collar or working-class occupations; and often both.

an overnight stay, even if sometimes they require travel to other states. Several men earned a credential in auto mechanics; two men became Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs); and two completed training at the police academy. For those who earned an associate degree, most were for vocational or technical training, and most were earned from for-profit entities. Most of the bachelor's degrees were from nonprofit schools, all within the state of Pennsylvania.

Given the particular challenge for those who take on the debts associated with higher education but fail to earn a meaningful credential to take into the labor market (Fry 2014), an important subgroup of cases are those men who have completed some college but did not earn a degree. In this study, this group includes a range of cases, which mirrors national trends (Shapiro et al. 2014). A couple men in this category enrolled in a local university but failed to complete any credits; in both cases, the men took on a relatively small amount of debt, and both have since paid off those obligations. This differs greatly from others who attended several years of college, often getting very close to earning a degree before leaving.

"On-the-Job" Adulthood

How do the men in this study speak about their decisions to pursue post-secondary education or training? There has been a well-documented "college for all" push in recent decades (Reynolds and Baird 2010; Rosenbaum 2001) so pervasive that the aspiration to attend college persists well into adulthood, even among low-income students who have failed to make progress toward a degree (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014; Deterding 2015). Further, for those low-income students who pursue a post-

secondary credential, many find themselves taken in by predatory, for-profit schools that often leave students with debt and no viable credential (Cottom 2017; Holland and DeLuca 2016; Nguyen 2012). Yet despite these poor returns of education for low-income and working-class youth, recent work by (Silva and Snellman 2018) argue that working-class young adults still cast the decision to go to college in terms of their "salvation"—as the way out of the grim realities of working-class life, a tool that allows them to generate efficacy and optimism about the future, despite the fact that most do not have the knowledge or practical guidance to successfully navigate the landscape of higher education.

In contrast to this picture of working-class young adulthood in existing literature, the men in this study evince neither the "college for all" mantra, nor do they see college as a means of salvation from working-class life. In fact, these men embrace their place within the working class, and for them, education and training is one way to explore vocational interests at a time of life when many of their college-going peers are doing the same, but the latter in the context of college, as they switch majors, take internships and summer jobs, and make their first forays into the working world. Upon examining the narratives of the men in this study, I argue that the fact that a plurality of the have tried some type of post-secondary education should not be understood as an attempt to escape working-class life or accrue a credential that set them apart from working-class peers, but as an exercise of vocational exploration in an employment landscape that no longer answers the vocational question for them by guaranteeing a lifetime job simply by walking across town from the high school to the plant.

Some men in this study have little opportunity to explore vocations, as life circumstances or personal choices thrust them into adulthood much sooner than expected, limiting opportunities for personal growth. For example, Ryan and his older brother, whose dad had already passed away, both dropped out of high school to work when their mom became addicted to drugs, leaving them to raise their younger siblings and bring income into the home. Frank and Curtis both got into drugs while in high school, pursuits they carried into young adulthood that derailed more legitimate efforts at vocational exploration and discernment.

But for most men in the study, there was a period of exploration after high school and well into adulthood that usually did not follow a straight-line path, even for those who eventually earned a degree or credential. Only one of the seven men in this study with a bachelor's degree enrolled directly after high school and finished in four years. Of seven men with an associate degree, less than half went straight into the program after high school and finished on time. And of the thirteen with a credential, only four earned their credential right after high school and then used it in the labor market after earning it. While one perspective on this is that these men are poorly equipped to navigate the world of post-secondary education (Silva 2013; Silva and Snellman 2018), another is that these men simply do not know what they want to do and are trying out options, some of which require education and some of which do not.

A good example of this type of meandering path of vocational exploration is Justin. Justin, now 34, was born to a steelworker father and homemaker mother. Two weeks after high school, he enrolled in a culinary school in Pittsburgh with the thought that he "wanted to be a chef on a cruise line," mostly because he wanted to travel.

However, he left after just one term, finding he didn't like cooking other people's recipes, plus he "spent way too much money there." (He took out $6,000 for school; he paid down about $2,000 of the total, and then his parents eventually paid off the rest.) Justin moved home and got a job as short order cook for a local restaurant, but he had a falling out with the owner and then took a job unloading trucks at a warehouse. He was contacted by a military recruiter when he was having a bad day and was talked into taking the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), even though he was quite unsure about the military. When he scored well, he enlisted "on a whim" and ended up serving five years, including thirteen months deployed to Afghanistan. Once he was discharged, he was still unsure his next step:

> So yeah, but then once I got out of the Army, I came back home, got a job, found out that I couldn't really get a shop job where I could just shut my brain off when I get home and be with my family, so I went back to school with the intention—I thought I was going to be a nurse—but I was walking a dog, which... a dog I brought back from Hawaii and it had a little too big a bowel movement and I vomited so I knew that I probably shouldn't get into nursing.

Using his GI Bill, he earned a degree in elementary education while supporting himself by working as a manager at a fast food restaurant. Justin now teaches at an elementary school; he was the first in his family to earn a bachelor's degree.

There are many other examples in this study of men on this winding vocational path. After high school, Dan worked briefly a lumber mill and then at a warehouse. After seven years at the warehouse, he was still only making $8.50 an hour, so when the company gave the option for a voluntary layoff, he took it: "So I took… voluntary layoff that summer, and then I seen, actually my brother-in-law found it online, was transporting trucks… and from there I got my CDL." He drove long-haul trucks, but that only last for six or seven months: "I enjoyed it at first, but just being away from home too long."

Despite making good money as a truck driver, he left the job and found local work for less money at an auto garage. Meanwhile, he put in applications, including at a steel mill, where he was hired as a general laborer. Dan, now 40, has complaints about the schedule at the mill and has a few health problems that making standing all day difficult ("You suffer through it, it's a job"), but the job is close by, has full benefits, and pays well enough ($13.75 an hour); he's been there over ten years. But it is still not his dream vocation: he spends his spare time tinkering on cars in his makeshift home garage, and he's in the process of putting in an application to do maintenance for one of the nearby municipalities. The last chapter of his vocational journey is likely yet to be written.

Sean, 39, also has had a winding vocational path, but in contrast to Dan, Sean landed in work he truly loves. Sean got his Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) certification in high school, and a week after high school he was working as an EMT. He liked the work, but he was never paid for than $7.00 an hour and was always considered a part-time casual employee despite working more than fulltime hours. He left after four years and bounced among a few jobs, including shipping and receiving and detailing cars. He moved to North Carolina and worked for an energy company, but he was drawn back to Pennsylvania. He—like many men in this study—got a job piling lumber ("wasn't the greatest job, but it was somethin'"), but Sean managed to work his way up over several years into middle management. Still, despite making a salary in the $40,000s, he was not content vocationally. (Sean told of a particularly difficult time when he had to fire a man in his 50s whose wife was sick: "And it, I had a follow what the company wanted, and I had to let him go, and, and it was hard. You know, it was ugh. I don't like doin' it to anybody.") Through a friend, he got an opportunity to interview for a local law

enforcement position. He always wanted to be a cop, but he felt like he could not afford to take the time to go back to school. However, he was told if he got the job, they would cover the cost of his training as part of his employment. He got the job, and now years later, he's happily working in local law enforcement making over $25 an hour.

This "on-the-job" vocational exploration mirrors recent work examining the educational and career aspirations of low-income urban youth (DeLuca et al. 2016). DeLuca and her colleagues find that many of the youth in their study have an eagerness to launch into the labor market, often driven by a financial necessity or a need to get out on their own. But for the youth who pursue some post-secondary education or credential, they find that the four-year horizon of a bachelor's degree is too long (and expensive), so most opt for a shorter timeline by pursuing a credential with a concrete occupation in mind with the goal of getting into the labor force as soon as possible. This lines up with the behavior of the men in this study, at least insofar as very few of them moved from high school immediately into a college or university with plans for a four-year degree. Of the 61 men, only seven took that path, although other men in the study went back to a four-year college or university later, as we saw with Justin. But DeLuca and company also find that this strategy of "expedited adulthood" costs these urban youth in the long run by not allowing them time to adequately explore vocations that fit their interests and abilities. Particularly troublesome for these urban youth is the trap of predatory, for-profit colleges (Cottom 2017; DeLuca et al. 2016; Holland and DeLuca 2016). In this sense, the men in this study both conform and diverge from their urban counterparts: while these men do sometimes get off track in ways that costs them in the long run, most of them manage to land on their feet.

The most common paths of post-secondary education among the men in this study were a credential or an associate degree in a trade. In some cases, men launched into education or a credential, only to recognize that it was not a good fit. Derek did one semester at a technical college before leaving for a job: "I just didn't like it. I didn't like the schoolin'." When Derek got a job offer at a local tool and die shop, he left school for work. Don went to college after high school to pursue a degree in wildlife technology, but he also realized it was not for him: "But I literally partied my way out of school. But I was done with school. At 12 years, you know, I hated it. I went to college because I was supposed to and I didn't last very long there." Some credentials turned out not to be what the men expected: several of the men to earn a CDL found they did not like long-haul driving, so they either switched to driving locally or stopped driving and found other work. But many followed through on their credential or education; some used it for a time and eventually moved on to other work; and some continue to use their credential or education directly.

It is difficult to know why the men in this study fared relatively well with their post-secondary plans, especially relative to the urban youth in other studies. These men are not as disadvantaged as those studied by DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin (2016), but they are still solidly working-class from modest roots who arguably share the traits of those who face disadvantages navigating the landscape of higher education (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Calarco 2018; Lareau 2011). One observation is that most of the men who pursued higher education sought a well-recognized credential, such as a Commercial Driver's License (CDL) or Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), rather than more obscure or less-employable credentials. CDLs seemed particularly

effective because employers sometimes paid for the cost of the credential in exchange for some commitment to drive for the company. Similarly, Sean found that the cost of attending the police academy was covered by his employer, as long as he was the one chosen for the job. Even for those men who pursued an associate degree at a for-profit school, virtually all were at recognized institutions, such as Triangle Tech or Erie Institute of Technology. Several men pursued vocational degrees at branch campuses of reputable schools like University of Pittsburgh and Penn State University, perhaps testament to the value of established schools investing in branch campuses and extension programs. Among those men who chose to go the route of a four-year college or university, all but one went to a school among the state university system in Pennsylvania, again evidence of the value of a relatively low-cost, state-funded education system as a ladder for many first-generation and working-class students. Finally, it is notable that virtually all men pursued their post-secondary credential within the state of Pennsylvania, many within driving distance of home, which suggests the importance of having reputable institutions nearby.

It also could be the case that white, working-class men in rural Pennsylvania are simply not the targets for predatory, for-profit schools in the way minority, urban youth have been. Virtually none of the men in this study appeared to be taken in by overtly predatory schemes, even those who attended for-profit colleges. As we see in these narratives, perhaps the military is the most predatory institution for this population by aggressively recruiting men into the armed services, even those who are unsure. None of the men in this study who served ended up making the military a career, some developed or exacerbated substance abuse habits while enlisted, and several served in active duty

roles and suffered traumatic experiences that remain with them today. That said, the military service is not without any benefit: those who served qualify for healthcare through the Veterans Administration (VA), and the GI Bill that enabled a number of men in this study to return to school and earn and education without taking on student debt, no small matter in a time when student debt is crushing many young adults (Fry 2014; Shapiro et al. 2014).[37]

To be clear, this process of "on-the-job" vocational exploration does not work out for everyone. Christian, 41, is an example of someone for whom the vocational exploration process has continually hit dead ends. After high school, he enrolled at Pennsylvania College of Technology to get an associate degree in electrical technology, but he said he was tired of being broke, "got impatient", and returned home to work before earning his degree. He got a factory job but was laid off, so he took the ASVAB while receiving unemployment insurance benefits. He served four years in the Air Force, then continued working for the military as a civilian in Virginia. Family ties drew him back to northwestern Pennsylvania in 2010, where he struggled to catch on to the right opportunity: "since then, it's been this trying to find something." At one point, Christian spent about three years out of the labor force caring for his kids and using his GI Bill to get an associate degree in IT from the University of Phoenix online, but that credential has yet to prove useful.[38] He also had a job for a local manufacturer for a time where they

37 The military will be discussed in more detail below as a *mobility measure*.
38 While most of the men in this study who earned associate degrees did so at for-profit entities, Christian's experience with the University of Phoenix is arguably a case of predation. Christian himself did not speak poorly about his experience, but the University of Phoenix is among the for-profit universities that has been under investigation for deceptive practices (Lobosco 2015). Notably, the Trump administration has been more friendly to for-profit colleges and universities.

trained him in robotics, but inexplicably to Christian, soon after they laid him off. When we spoke, Christian was unemployed but hopeful about a job lead in maintenance at a local hospital. Altogether, he has one-and-three-quarters associate degrees, plus on-the-job training from the military and in robotics, but stable employment has been elusive. Christian is one of the relatively few examples of "credential collecting" (Edin et al. 2019), a phenomenon describing the ways in which some working-class men amass credentials seemingly without rhyme or reason in hopes something works out.

Overall, the picture that emerges among these men's forays into post-secondary education is one in which they are at times aimless but not without agency. In the vacuum created by the lack of a dominant local employer, these men are forced to confront questions about vocational and career aspirations in ways many of their fathers did not. Yet contrary to depictions of working-class young adults being "profoundly lost" (Silva 2013) when navigating educational institutions, most men in this study seem to have adapted to this new "winding path" toward working-class adulthood, and few if any express "the vehement anger, defensiveness, and profound betrayal" (Silva 2013) found in other depictions of working-class young adults. This is not to gloss over the ways in which these men make mistakes, but in important respects, the lack of a clearly defined career path or employer has given these men the experience of vocational exploration long afforded their college-going peers.

There is also an important sense in which the frame of vocational discernment I suggest here cannot be separated from the labor market churning discussed in Chapter 2. As we see in the stories of Justin, Dan, and Sean, while they all sought at least one post-secondary credential, they did so within a labor market context that offered a relatively

poor set of choices. In fact, it was poor pay—even after years of service—that led Dan to leave the warehouse for trucking and Sean to leave behind his EMT credential for a series of jobs that ultimately landed him in law enforcement. However, it is also clear in these cases that income and wages is only part of the story. Dan left long-haul truck driving after just a few months because he did not like being away from home, even though it paid more than anything he has done before or since. And Sean left middle management at a lumber company to take a chance on law enforcement because he thought the latter would be more fulfilling than the former. and many others in the study. I explore these themes of work, identity, and vocation more fully in Chapter 5.

Why do the men in this study seem to approach the path to adulthood differently than has been found in other work about the working-class (DeLuca et al. 2016; Silva 2013; Silva and Snellman 2018)? I argue it is the way in which rurality and masculinity intersect in the identities of the men in this sample. First, as opposed to seeing working-class identity as something to be transcended (Silva and Snellman 2018), these men embrace being working class—or at least a particular vison of working class—as evidenced by their post-secondary choices. These men pursue credentials to be drivers, medical technicians, auto and bicycle mechanics, and police officers. They pursue associate degrees in electrical technology, welding and fabrication, X-ray technology, and wildlife management. A couple men in the study pursued higher education in art, once even earning an associate degree, yet both use that training primarily as tattoo artists. For many of the men, these interests can be traced back into high school, when many were part of the vocational-technical programs, pursuing everything from computer-aided drafting to the culinary arts to automotive technology. While the local

plant no longer exists as a place to live into a working-class destiny, these men still see themselves as working-class men, working out that identity in a broader world of employment and post-secondary choices. As I explore in Chapter 5, these men continue to want working-class jobs, and although the remuneration of those jobs is less than in the past, they still value the nature of such work: working with their hands, often outside, sometimes autonomous. Post-secondary education is a means to strengthen—not create distance from—working-class vocation. Second, there is a clear sense that most of these men—rather than seeing their rural hometowns as places to escape through education—see rural place as where they want to be, even for those who have been offered or exposed to other opportunities. This is a theme I explore more below.

Show Me, Don't Tell Me, What You Can Do

A second major theme about men's decisions to pursue post-secondary plans concerns what the men expect to gain from these pursuits. While a majority of men in this study have pursued some sort of postsecondary education or training, most of the men sought such training for the practical skills, not more esoteric reasons like bettering themselves or simply to escape their stations in life (Silva and Snellman 2018). While I argue that these men's post-secondary choices should be understood in terms of a type of vocational exploration—and thus a more open-ended attempt to find a skill or job that fits them—there is a still the sense that these men see education as a means to an end, not an end in itself. For these men, the pursuit of education is most often to gain a practical skill or trade that can be transferred in an immediate and obvious way to the labor market. In this sense, these men are much like the youth studied by (DeLuca et al. 2016), who most

often pursued higher education with a concrete occupation in mind and were eager to enter the labor market as soon as possible. For that reason, some men were quick to abandon education if they felt it was not serving these practical ends. And even for some who obtained the degree or credential, sometimes there was criticism in retrospect that the program did not teach them anything new. In this section, I detail the ways these men understood what they wanted from the post-secondary programs they chose. Additionally, because some of these men are employers as well as job-seekers, I draw upon the perspectives of a few of the men as employers to further show that formal educational credentials may be less valuable—and in fact, even seen as a disqualifier—in rural places where there is a premium placed on practical knowledge rather than paper credentials.

There are several the men in the study who exemplify the approach to post-secondary education as a practical pursuit of occupational or vocational skills for the labor market. Derek, Mark, and Christian are examples of men who left their post-secondary pursuits before completion because they received job offers in the fields they were training to enter. Derek did a semester at a technical college, and besides not feeling suited for more classroom schooling, he was convinced to leave school when he got a job offer:

> … and then when I got that phone call that really made my mind up that I was definitely done because I can go learn as an apprentice. In that industry, they'd rather see an apprenticeship than a degree. You know, this is hands on, this guy knows what he's doing, so that's another reason I took the job.

Mark was involved in firefighting as far back as high school, and he enrolled in a community college across the state to study firefighting. However, just two months into the program he was recruited to be a paid firefighter, so he left school for work.

While Derek and Mark were just beginning their schooling when they got jobs, Vince, Victor, and Christian had nearly finished their degrees before leaving school for work. While it may seem puzzling why they would leave so close to completing their educations, all three chose work over the credential. Vince, the only man in the study with both parents holding bachelor's degrees, has a more typically middle-class path to post-secondary education.[39] He did well in high school and always assumed he go to college, but he "never had a clear idea of what I would do for a job." Having already attended two universities and switched majors several times, Vince landed a job. As he explained:

> I was working on the side… part-time at Staples and part-time at a little Mom and Pop computer store, and the computer store offered me a full-time job for more money-ish than what some of my college graduate friends were making at the time. So, it was like, okay, I'll go try that.

Interestingly, when that computer shop folded not long after Vince left college for the job, he decided to move home and look for work rather than finish his degree. He has since settled into a successful career and doesn't see the need to go back: "it's one of those things where I feel like the expected thing, or the quote unquote right thing, would

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39 Vince, despite having two parents with bachelor's degrees, is included in the study based on his highest educational attainment—"some college, no degree"—which qualifies as working class according to one accepted definition in the literature. (See Chapter 1 for more discussion of definitions of working class and the screening criteria for the study.) Even though aspects of Vince's biography make him atypical among the men in this study, the goal of this study was heterogeneity of experiences within the sampling parameters. My approach when screening men into the study was to be as inclusive as possible in order not to unnecessarily eliminate variation were I to have used a narrower definition of "working class." In general, if a man was under 50, living in the field site, and "working class" according to at least one definition, I screened him into the study. Once interviewed, I viewed that data as supremely valuable, so the burden for removal was on the side of removal. One option would be to exclude Vince entirely, but it is the judgment of the researcher that the loss of data outweighs the ways in which Vince might be less characteristic—in some ways—from other men in the study. The fact remains that he is a younger man without a four-year college degree living in northwestern Pennsylvania, which justifies his inclusion in the study.

be to go back and finish that, but I still don't have a strong push to do that because I'm kind of now established in a career and I don't know, you know, I don't know."

Victor, one of the few men in the study not originally from northwestern Pennsylvania, has dabbled in school over the years, earning an associate degree in business administration from a community college in Florida while working as a bartender before moving to northwestern Pennsylvania, where his wife was raised. He was just a few classes short of his bachelor's degree in Florida, but he was turned off from finishing after taking an internship from a commercial real estate company. The company told him they would hire him after he finished his degree, but the starting salary would have been half of what he was already making as a bartender. He said, "I was like four classes away or something like that, and I was just like, 'This is silly.'" And as we saw above, Christian—who has pursued multiple avenues of post-secondary education and training—left his initial attempt at schooling just shy of his associate degree because he grew impatient: "I wanted money; I'd work, instead of be broke and be in school."

Additional evidence that many of these men see post-secondary education as a means to an end comes in the form of those who complained that the training did not teach them new or needed skills. Randy admitted several times when talking about his experience studying to be an electrician at a local technical school that he had an unfair advantage, given that his father and grandfather before him were electricians in a family-run business. However, he found the education lacking: "… when you have teachers instructing you and you feel that you know more than they do, it's just a little awkward to be there, but I had an unfair advantage." Randy said he often found himself wandering the halls because he was "so bored." However, he stuck with the program because his

family wanted him to have the credential, so Randy made the best of it, bonding with another student who also brought in advanced knowledge: “And I got lucky, there was another kid in the class that had been around construction and wired his grandparents’ whole house, and I mean, he had some good knowledge and we kind of palled around together.” When Randy earned his degree, he went back home to work in the family business, where much of one’s success is based upon reputation, not paper credentials. Randy recently took over the family business, and he stressed that the business lives off reputation:

> I do very little advertising because most the time the bang for the buck is just not there. So, I don’t do a lot of that and the people coming in, it’s just nice to see where they heard from you. And a lot of it’s just word of mouth reputation in town; I can’t take credit for all that cause between granddad and my dad and uncle it’s a strong name through town, so I’m living off of that. I think I've improved it.

He notes regarding his degree, “I've only had one person ever ask for the certificate,” and “they just needed somebody’s creds to have on file.”

Jeremiah’s dad, a contractor, influenced his interest in building such that Jeremiah chose the architecture and design concentration in his high school Vo-Tech program. After considering several schools, he enrolled in the same technical college as Derek. Jeremiah thought he would be permitted to place out of some of the entry-level courses, so he was frustrated to learn after arriving on campus that was not an option. He tried to make the best of it, but he lost interest after crossing the instructor:

> So, I just kind of went with it and I went to the class and I thought, “Well, maybe they’ll, maybe there will be something different that I’ll learn, and I’ll learn a better way of doing something.” But they were teaching on an older, outdated version of CAD and they were teaching an older, outdated way of doing things. And, so, like, we got a drawing packet at the beginning of the semester with, like, 50 drawings in it, and we had to have them all done by the end of the semester. And by the end of the second week, I had all of my drawings done and I was

> showing the other kids in the class the shortcuts and the key strokes to get through the program. The teacher was not happy with me telling everybody how to get around the involved process of doing things. I kind of, I just stopped going to class. So, since participation and being there was so much of the grade, like, I kind of... I did all right, I think I got Cs and maybe a couple Bs, but I was not in it to go to class. So, I stopped going to class and started partying and hanging out with my friends and, you know, doing other things, so yeah.

Jeremiah stayed one more semester but dropped his major "because I knew all of that stuff and I didn't want to do it again." He took mostly general education requirements, and then left the school after a year with no degree.

Finally, there is evidence among those men in the study who are employers that paper credentials matter less than personal trust and a demonstrated ability to do the job. As we saw with Randy, small businesses in the area rely on the strength of reputation. This dynamic also applies to employers when they seek prospective employees, at least when it comes to jobs that have some technical requirement.[40] Brett, who runs a towing company, talked at some length about the challenges of staffing. For drivers, he said they have gone to having a trial period with prospective drivers: "… what we started doing with drivers, we bring them in for three days if possible. And we do a trial with them for three days. And I can tell you whether or not they're going to be able to run a truck after those three days."

40 While employers complain it is difficult to find good workers, there is evidence in the work histories of the men in the study that there are many poorly-paid, entry-level jobs in this area that require virtually no requirements. This is covered in more detail in Chapter 2.

Geographical Mobility

Almost as common as upskilling as a strategy to improve employment prospects were what I call *mobility measures* to improve labor market opportunities. While recent attention has been given to reasons why less-educated men are not moving out-of-state for work (Semuels 2017; Williams 2017; Yglesias 2013), the narrow focus on out-of-state moves misses other mobility tactics, such as enlisting in the military or taking jobs that require travel. And even with moves, I find that the most common approach was to move away for brief periods on what I call *prospecting trips*, where men move without a job in search of better opportunities. Overall, almost one-third of the men in the study had at one point moved out of state for work. In most cases, the men were single at the time of the move, and the move was accompanied by little plan. Men often moved to a place where they had family or friends but no concrete job prospects. Sometimes they managed to find a job, but other times, they did not and returned home. In virtually all cases, the episode was relatively short-lived, and the men eventually ended up back in northwestern Pennsylvania. Of course, given the nature of my cases, I cannot know if some men took similar measures but found work elsewhere and stayed. It is the case that with those in this sample who moved away but returned, the men both had trouble making it work elsewhere and expressed a longing for rural place.

William served in the Navy after high school. After he was discharged, he moved into an already crowded house in Ohio with his Dad, his uncle and his wife, and grandmother. William worked a few jobs, none of which led to advancement, and then he also found himself the primary caregiver for his aging grandmother, which was too much: "… I, as a twenty-one or so year old kid, like I couldn't handle like watching my

grandmother deteriorate, let alone be in charge of her care." He returned home to northwestern Pennsylvania, but his luck finding meaningful work was not more fruitful, so he decided to try his luck in North Carolina, where he had been stationed in the service:

> And then I went down to North Carolina, um tried to get work down there. Ended up working, uh, painting houses. Did that for a little while. Worked in the food service industry on base for a while. And then wrecked my car, got a DUI. And then from there, uh, spent the ten days in jail and then hitchhiked back home.

For Zach and Scott, their moves out of state were attempts to make clean breaks, at least for a season. For Zach, who had a bout with cancer not long after high school, his move was a chance to get away. He moved in with his sister in Kentucky and stocked shelves at a grocery store at night: "I just wanted to get away for a while, everything had been so crazy with chemo and everything, and I was just kind of over being in the area and was just ready to try something else." He thought it would be a long-term move, but he wasn't making enough to pay his bills, plus a nascent relationship with a woman back home started to get more serious over the miles. For Scott, his move was a chance to break bad habits:

> I moved to Florida. Um, I tried to set myself straight once. Um, I kind of got stuck in the alcohol world, um, and I had a, a relative that um, lived in Florida at the time, so I um, I moved down there, kind of got my life a little more sober, I guess. Um, I moved back, and I don't know what could've been, because I wasn't there long enough, so...

He moved in with a cousin and his cousin's grandparents, but he failed to find work, so he moved back after just a couple months. He missed his friends, and like Zach, he "was talking to somebody" before he left, which also made it hard to stay away.

While some men were escaping things when they moved, others moved to pursue concrete opportunities elsewhere. Thomas learned masonry from his Dad and grandfather

and carpentry from a man he worked for in high school. He worked a few carpentry and contracting jobs during and after high school, but he was lured out west to work for a cousin. He lived with a couple buddies, worked hard, and played harder: "We flipped houses. The economy there was great… [W]e made bank, but I drank a lot, and a lot of that bank was going straight to the bar." After awhile, he moved back to northwestern Pennsylvania and took a job with another friend. Thomas described life out west as "fast-paced" and the people outside of northwestern Pennsylvania as "more genuine." In the end, he said that he "couldn't imagine living anywhere else [than northwestern Pennsylvania]."

The move out of state worked out—for a time—for men like Sean and Doug. Sean, the EMT later turned law enforcement officer, also had a stint working in North Carolina: "Then I, and eventually I went to North Carolina 'cause I was just frustrated with not being able to find something around here." He had an aunt and uncle near Charlotte, and although they did not have a close relationship, he reached out and they invited him to stay there until he got on his feet. Sean initially lived with his family and took a job at the "steel manufacturing place" where his uncle worked while he put in other applications. He eventually got a job at a utility company and made relatively good money. He enjoyed the weather, but he also said he always looked forward to his annual hunting trip with his Dad back in Pennsylvania. After living in North Carolina for a time and without much explanation, he said he just moved back to northwestern Pennsylvania and has been back ever since: "it's nice to live here."

While most men who moved were single, two men were in relationships when they made their forays out of state. Doug and his girlfriend moved in with a cousin of his

in Las Vegas after he and his girlfriend burned some bridges with close friends in northwestern Pennsylvania. Doug, who did restaurant work in Pennsylvania, quickly got connected with the culinary union and was making good wages with benefits. However, his girlfriend failed to find work, and because they lived in "a really shitty part of town," she felt unsafe going out on her own. Over time, she became increasingly unhappy, and eventually, they decided, "we need to get outta here." They actually had plans to go to Florida to live with her mother, but a family emergency pulled them back to Pennsylvania, where they remain. Patrick and his wife decided to move to neighboring Ohio: "… our thought was we might be able to make it better somewhere else." He wife received Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI), and he worked for a chain of family restaurants. He took a transfer to a different location and hoped to find better work, perhaps a factory job: he "thought it would be a better place to do, to be able to make a better life out yourself, out myself." Yet he admitted he "never scouted the area," and he found upon getting there that "there wasn't anything." After about six months, he moved back.

A small group of the men in the sample—about ten percent—at one point took jobs that required extensive travel, including work as members of itinerant work crews and as long-haul truck drivers. For most who did itinerant work, the job was usually taken when the man was young and unmarried; it was a chance to make money and see a bit more of the state or country. Brad worked locally after high school, but…

> … then came an opportunity and that's when I started traveling through the United States doing like rubber roofing. And that's what really started me going elsewhere throughout like the United States. Just going places that normally people don't get to go to, let alone me going twenty plus places every year.

Similarly, Jeff worked for a time as part of a traveling crew that repaired kilns. He stayed relatively close to home—Ohio, West Virginia, and other parts of Pennsylvania—but he found it a nice diversion from home:

> We didn't know what was going to be next, when the job was going to be. You know, I was just dating… at the time. It was kind of a nice getaway. It kind of got boring [at home] 'cause, you know, I had a girlfriend that couldn't go and do anything, you know. But, but it was, it was different. You got to see some different places. Um, uh, you know, just the thrill of working on the road and the hotel. At least you get that experience. It's not; it's not all it's psyched up to be, you know. It's pretty boring, but also made good money.

In most cases, this work on traveling crews was short-lived and confined to early adulthood. However, Larry made it into a career. After high school, Larry worked in a local factory for a few years, served in the Army, and went back to the factory. However, he had an older brother who worked on oil and gas rigs as a driller, and Larry said his brother "had always been telling me how great of a job it is. And how much money you can make." Larry put him off, unwilling to consider another dangerous job after having served in the military. But when he realized that an entry-level position on a rig paid considerably more than he was making at the factory, he told his brother to let him know if they needed someone. Larry has been working in the industry since 2007, and although there have been a few slow times when he's been temporarily laid off, he's always been brought back on when work picks up. The job can take him away for a month or more at a time, but he reasons it is better than the factory, which for him was seven days a week. He does his best to request time off to coincide with significant events of his kids, like recently when he asked for time off to chaperon a field trip for his son. While hard in some ways, he says his children and wife are used to it:

> So, it's a little rough, but the kids have already been through me being gone, so it is a little tough on them but not as bad. My wife, it can be tough on her, because

> there is nobody helping her out with different things, but she's been doing it since 2007. She is kind of use to it, you know.

Another factor that makes his work more palatable is the fact he is among the highest earning men in this study, easily making into the six-figures annually once his hourly wages, per diem, and overtime pay are factored together.

Several of the men tried long-haul trucking. While these jobs tended to pay better than jobs available back home, in many cases they came with a cost to relationships. In fact, all but one of the men doing this type of long-distance travel for work have now moved to other jobs or means of support. As we saw above, Dan took a voluntary layoff to get his CDL and start driving, but he only lasted about six months, learning that he missed home too much. The story was similar with Nick. With a newborn at home, he needed more employment certainty than his work at the local factory provided, which had started rolling layoffs: "I came across an ad in the paper to, uh, go driving and learn to become a CDL driver." The company paid all the training costs if the driver stayed with them for six months, so Nick gave those six months plus one, then moved to what he saw as a better company. However, he still didn't like being away, so he eventually took to alternating between long-haul and local driving:

> There wasn't enough money in this area to make… to provide for the things that was going on here, but I always wanted to be back here because I wanted to see my child, you know? I missed out on a lot of things while I was out driving. So, I kind of bounced back and forth like trying to save up some money and do the on the road thing and come back here and get a job until I just couldn't take it anymore 'cause we weren't making ends meet.

When his marriage ended, Nick went back to long-haul driving, although he was frustrated with the larger trucking companies that had no regard for his scheduling requests, such as when he wanted to be home for weekends when he had his daughter. He

eventually moved exclusively to local driving, which he has been doing for almost ten years.

Jared also feels like he paid a high price for his time over-the-road. He had already earned his CDL for a previous job—although it had lapsed—and he found himself in a period of job transition. Like Nick, an advertisement caught his attention:

> This thing came on TV and said, "Drive for us," and I said, okay, you know. And I called them and, and they said, "how much experience you have?" I said I drive fire trucks and log trucks and stuff. They said, "oh, we can put you on a bus," and I said "when", they said, "tomorrow."

Jared took a three-and-a-half-day bus trip to Phoenix to take his road test, which he passed. But Jared minced no words about the long-term outcome of driving: "And I said, yeah, and I climbed in a truck, started driving, got married like seven months later, drive for seven more years over the road, got a divorce, job killed my marriage." He learned his wife had been cheating, and the marriage ended soon after. But he acknowledged the complexity of the situation:

> But when I was, when I was married, what killed my marriage… was just not being home because I got greedy and stuff you know. There's this load that needs to go to Chattanooga, okay, put her on let's do it, you know. And, and I'd be like in Pittsburgh and she, I'd put a load on in Chattanooga, oh I'm going to have to pull out, dear, and I'd go to Chattanooga, you know, and stuff like that. And I wouldn't see her for nine, ten weeks at a time and stuff you know. We'd talk on the phone several times a day. But I mean, it was partly my fault ruining the marriage, but it was partly her fault too, because she didn't control herself while I was home you know. I didn't screw around on her. I had chances, I never did it, you know and stuff.

An overlooked means by which men attempt social mobility, especially among minority and working-class men, is joining the military (Butler and Moskos 1996; Kleykamp 2006; Silva 2013). In this study, nearly one-fifth of the men enlisted in the military, which also resulted—directly or indirectly—in geographic mobility: these men

were trained, stationed, or deployed out of state (and even out of the country).[41] In many cases, the men enlisted with plans to make a career of the military, but none in this study did, often dissuaded once exposed to the rigors of military life or the trauma of combat. Yet the main line of argument here is not whether the military yielded a stable career—military or civilian—or whether the men who served in some way benefitted from their service, but simply the fact that in all cases the decision to enlist meant leaving the confines of northwestern Pennsylvania for other destinations.[42] Some men, like Justin above, enlisted essentially on a whim. Others, like Brandon, saw it as the only remaining option: "It was either the Army or be homeless, so I chose the Army, and spent eight years in the Army as a mechanic." And yet others, like Todd, saw it as a ticket out of town:

> And so, when I graduated, the first thing I wanted to do is get out of town. But I didn't know what I was gonna do with college. And it was so much pressure for me to go to college I just decided, I'm like, I can't, I don't know what to do. So, I, one day just went to all the military meetings that they had at the school, and the one guy that didn't yell and scream at me was the Air Force guy. And he's like, "Well, it's like a job, go to work, sometimes you got to work weekends, if we go to war, then you probably have to go to war. But the good thing about the Air Force is, we send the expensive guys out to fight the battles and the cheap guys sit way back off the front lines on the Airbase". He said, "So, your chance of survival is really good. And we very, very rarely will put a backpack on you." So, I said, "Perfect, sign me up. If it gets me out of town, I'm good."

A few men enlisted with more intention, seeing the military as connected to broader career aspirations. Blake, influenced by a mentor, has had his sights set on being

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41 For comparison, exactly one-fifth of respondents in (Silva 2013) study of working-class young adults had military experience, but only one-quarter of those had their service result in secure civilian careers. While the focus of this chapter is on choosing the military as a *mobility measure*, I explore pathways to good jobs more fully in Chapter 4.

42 Although the focus here is geographic and not social mobility, it is still worth noting that military service, while it has some material benefits, often does not get men very far vocationally upon their return.

a firefighter since high school. His mentor, a fireman himself, counseled Blake that military service—specifically the Coast Guard—would be excellent preparation:

> And so, he was telling me, you know, "If you join the military, you get extra bonus points on your civil service exam." And then, you know, instead of paying for college, you get free college when you're done. And then you have job experience and all the stuff that comes with that. And then he was saying, in most places you can get that time that you spent in the military towards your cause firefighters can retire at 20 years or a lot of them. And so, he was saying you could still retire, you know, if you join when you're 38 you get out of military and go into the fire department, you can still retire when you're 38. So that sounded like a great idea to me. So, I signed up, and I signed up, and I went to the rescue swimming school.

While men who enlisted could not know how their decision would play out, the very act of enlisting shows a willingness to be mobile in search of opportunity or adventure.

"Stickiness" of Rural Place

While I find that many men have attempted a *mobility measure*, these men who leave are drawn back to the area by a combination of attachment to family and love of rural place, evidence of a "stickiness of place" that supersedes any marginal increase in earning opportunities elsewhere. Men express this "stickiness" both affirmatively in their recitations of aspects of what has been called the rural idyll (Bell 2006), and negatively in their characterizations of urban space as expensive and potentially dangerous, which plays at least in part on racialized stereotypes. Among the cases, a few men express interest in leaving the area in the future, but most men are content in rural place, even if it means fewer employment opportunities. There is a clear sense among these men, whether or not their mobility efforts were "successful", that they were all drawn back by a sense

of attachment—and *preference for*—rural place that was also home.[43] It is perhaps expected that those who did not have employment success in other places—men like Scott and Zach—would return, perhaps then retrospectively praising their hometowns, having failed to "escape". Yet there is also this attachment to rural place in Thomas and Sean, who both had employment success in other states. Thomas, who has family our west and made a good living in Utah and Arizona for a time, describes in great detail what he loves about the area:

> If you're looking for quiet and solitude. Beauty. If you like seasons. Like, I lived out West, and it was fast. Everything's fast-paced. It's definitely not here. It's a lot different. It's hard to even get through seasons is tough, like winter's so long, but you find things to do to get through it. I fish a lot, so we ice fish to get through winters. I remember skate boarding as a kid. You couldn't wait 'til winter would end, and then it finally did. It's a great place to live. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else cause I did, and it wasn't.... I fish in it. It's these things that you grow up with. When you see gun control, you think to yourself like, oh man, if they only understood. We've got a rack of twenty-twos and we shoot stuff all day long as kids. It's just what you did. It's something you did growing up. It's not gun control that needs to be instilled. It's a way of living for us. You might say we're a little hillbilly. It's a little hillbilly of an area, but it's a great place to live.

Sean, who had a job for a utility company in North Carolina making about $40,000 a year but returned, shared similar sentiments: "Well… the seasons are beautiful. You know, the leaves change, there's, there's a lot of neat things."

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43 In this study, 85 percent of the men were born and raised in northwestern Pennsylvania, and another 8 percent moved to the area as children or youth; only four of 61 men moved to the area as adults. While migration patterns in rural America are not uniform (Smith, Winkler, and Johnson 2016), rural areas have generally experienced depopulation over the last century (Johnson and Lichter 2019). Nativity to the study area was not a screen for inclusion in the study, but given broader trends, it is not surprising that virtually all men in the study are from the area originally. This creates a selection problem when analyzing motives for staying: by definition, these men are those who have stayed, and missing are those from the area who have left. Despite this limitation, I argue there is value in examining the rhetoric of attachment to rural place as a key feature of why these men remain, whether or not one suspects this is a proactive rationale driving behavior or retrospective justification for failure to leave (Carr and Kefalas 2009). This will be further explored in Chapter 5.

While there are affirmative reasons why the men chose to stay, there are also negative impressions of other places—sometimes based in racialized stereotypes—that make home sound better. Nick tells of a friend in a mid-sized city whose two-mile commute could take thirty minutes. But a more racialized area of concern about cities is crime: the men see small towns as safe and other areas as not. In a race-neutral description, Sean expresses the safety of the area, perhaps overstating the dangers elsewhere:

> … there's not very much violence here. If there, if there's, um, there is a drug problem, of course there is, but I think you have that everywhere. Um, but, you know, you can, you can... at least up in this neighborhood and, and, and through, like, throughout the city, you can see people walkin' their dogs, you know. It's nice you don't have to worry about violence and things like that, so, I mean, it's just a nice, quiet area.

For Nick, however, this fear of violence is racialized. As a former long-haul truck driver, he spoke of his experience in places like Compton and Detroit. He told of one time in Memphis where he heard gun shots when doing paperwork in his cab. At times, Nick spoke in more neutral terms, although his remarks uphold stereotypes of dangerous urban space: "You never had to worry about, you know, any of the issues that bigger cities do. You can safely walk down a street one, two, three o'clock in the morning and not feel like you're going to get robbed or nothing." But elsewhere, Nick equates "diversity" with "craziness" in the context of discussing city life:

> I said, it's not even Pittsburgh. I said, it's a whole new ballgame because those are the things that I never knew because I almost feel sheltered growing up in this town. There's not enough diversity in this town that would show you remotely close to what's out there in this world…. Craziness can be out there, and you have absolutely no idea.

While most men in the study had a stated preference for living in northwestern Pennsylvania, a few men also mentioned they needed to remain close because of

arrangements with custodial and noncustodial children, either their own of those of their current partner or spouse. In many cases, this proves no barrier to mobility since the men prefer to stay close by anyway. Jeremy, who works a custodial job for a state-run facility, has two step-daughters from his wife's previous marriage. He says that he and his wife are "not allowed to leave the area" because his wife's divorce agreement with her ex-husband stipulates "that both parties have to stay within the… school district." Although he and his wife would like to have their lives back, they are content in the area. Brett, on the other hand, would happily leave the area if not for his custody arrangement with his ex-wife. Brett had a contentious divorce from his first wife, and they share custody of their three boys. Brett remarried and has a child with his current wife, plus she has a son from a previous marriage. While the arrangements Brett's current wife has with her ex are informal, Brett's wife has made sure everything has been through the courts. Formal or not, Brett and his wife feel committed to the area despite being the exceptions in the study in expressing a preference for urban living: "We don't… the small-town living is not really our thing, we like big towns." He and his wife go to Pittsburgh "quite a bit," and he spoke fondly of an annual work convention in Baltimore he and his wife enjoy. He said they appreciate the amenities of the city, the walkability of the downtown, but especially the anonymity:

> They [in the city] honestly don't care who you are, what your past is. You get into a small town everybody wants to be in your business. Everybody knows everything about you from the time you were in diapers up through. And it's just… you get into the city and people think it's rude. But, really, they're minding their own business just like the rest of us should.

Brett said, "it's just small town is just not our thing. And probably once the kids are gone, we'll probably progress from there."

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Carr and Kefalas (2009) describe four types of people in their study of rural Iowa: Achievers, Stayers, Seekers, and Returners. The Returners have much in common with the men in this study who have attempted a *mobility measure*: they have gone away—gaining education, military training[44], or life experience—but they slink back almost unnoticed to their hometowns "when their new lives fail to take hold" (2009: 107). This depiction certainly seems true in some cases, as many men in this study who ventured out—often without a plan—ended up back home in short order with little to show for venturing away. However, this depiction undervalues the ways in which men in this study were drawn back to their towns—not just from failure to "make it" elsewhere—but because they express a sense of deep connection to both *rural* and *home*. This theme will be more fully explored in Chapter 5, as I argue that rurality plays an important role in this study as an independent variable on a number of key outcomes.

Occupational Flexibility

Consistent with existing evidence of the reluctance of men to enter female-dominated occupations, just a few of the men in this study have worked in such jobs. Justin, profiled above, used his GI Bill to get a degree in elementary education, and he is currently the only male teacher or staff in his entire private elementary school: "I'm the only guy in the building really most days". Paul, who worked in a manual job for over a decade, found himself in need of work and used a connection of his wife's to get a job

44 Carr and Kefalas put men who joined the military as an escape in the Seekers category.

working the front desk at a drug and alcohol treatment facility. A couple men in the study left the formal labor force completely for a time, in consultation with their wives or partners, in order to stay at home and be the primary caregiver for their children. Yet overall, these examples were relatively rare.

The most common female-dominated field considered by men in the study was healthcare. Phil is one man in the sample who works as a Registered Nurse (RN). He describes his interest in "science and health science" going back to childhood, when he would read books about the human body. His interest in the health field was spurred by two events of his childhood: his grandfather dying of lung cancer and his mother giving birth to conjoined twins. He describes the influence of being in the hospital and ICU a lot, seeing nurses and doctors. However, his first love is music, and he considered both music and nursing when thinking about college:

> I was actually accepted to [university] for music, which is what I—music's kind of my favorite thing. That's what I really wanted to do, but I didn't think I would be able to have a significant income or support a family off of that. So, actually, I was accepted to [university] for music program first, then I started applying for nursing, too, and thought maybe I should do this instead. I got accepted to both and I chose the nursing over music mostly due to financial reasons, but both of them are of interest to me.

Similar to the approach to education and training we saw earlier in this chapter, Phil was eager for the most direct path to a credential that would get him into the labor market. He chose a local branch campus because it was closest and cheapest, plus he saved room and board costs by living at home. He explains his thinking:

> I knew going into school that all I needed to start working to get like a nurse's salary was an associate's. So that was my plan was just get the associate's and start working because I figured I probably couldn't afford to pay for a bachelor's anyway. I needed to get an income sooner rather than later…

Phil earned some grants and scholarships, worked all through school, and lived at home, yet he graduated after five semesters with about $20,000 in student loans. Despite the debt, his credential has been rewarded: a week after graduating, he started working at a local hospital. He began at $18 an hour and quickly moved to $19.50 when he passed his boards. Seven years later, Phil's base pay is now about $24 an hour, and he usually makes around $27-28 an hour factoring in various pay incentives, such as working nights, being the charge nurse in the ER or ICU, and holding certain certifications. He works 36 hours a week, has benefits and union protections, and has paid back about half of his student loans.[45]

The other side of health care work is that of a direct care staff, which is Alex's job title in his work at a local nursing home. Alex struggled with alcoholism for much of his adult life, making it difficult for him to hold a job. After losing his family and entering residential rehabilitation twice, he finally got sober. It was during his rehabilitation he got the idea for working in direct care:

> Well, when I... when I was in the ministry, I, uh, I visited a home a couple of times and I kind of wish that maybe that's... maybe that's something that I wanted to do, but then I wasn't sure, you know, if you had to go to school for it or not. So, when I got back home, I seen that job in the paper and I said, you know what, I'm gonna... I need this job. So, I went down and she hired me right away.

Alex finds the work fulfilling, but the pay and schedule have been challenges. For his first four years, Alex worked third shift, which was difficult when he also had to have his children during the day. For the last year, he has worked mostly second shift, occasionally first shift. Yet after five years, Alex makes $8.25 an hour, just a dollar over

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45 Phil is an outlier in his willingness to undertake a female-dominated job, albeit a well-paying one. More detail about his self-understanding in this occupation is included later in the chapter.

the minimum wage. He thinks that other local facilities pay more, but he is emotionally attached to his residents and reluctant to leave them. He also expresses gratitude for the raises he has received and reluctance to challenge his boss: "Um, well, I think for what I'm doing they should pay... pay me a lot more than I am getting, but I'm not, you know, going to say anything because it's what she pays me and I've got raises here once in a while." Alex says that the next step up would be to what he calls the "med nurse", but he is not interested if it means less contact with residents, which is what he enjoys about the job: "If I could do that [med nurse] but still do the floor, I'd like that. I just don't want to be just the med nurse because it's... it's kind of, so slow for me, you know. I want to help everybody and walk around and do all that kind of stuff." Despite the less attractive aspects of his job, he plans to stay in the field of healthcare.

Despite how few men in the study work in healthcare, several others considered pursuing healthcare and even took initial steps toward a healthcare job or training. Gary, 46, got the closest, enrolling in an eighteen-month course to become a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN). After high school, Gary worked for a couple years at McDonald's, ten years at a lumber mill, eight years as a custodian, and four years at a company that processed damaged vehicles for insurance companies. When the salvage company closed its local office, displacing several dozen workers, Gary received unemployment insurance. He said he was under the impression that if he started school, his unemployment would last until he finished. He began the LPN training and was only partially through the program when his unemployment insurance ran out. Without the support of UI, Gary needed income to support his family, so he left the program to work. He currently works in a related field as a Personal Care Aid for a man with disabilities

who needs around the clock supervision. Gary works third shift and makes $12.50 an hour, but he would like to go back to get his Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) credential, ideally at a facility that pays for the training as part of employment. Gary likes that this work brings together getting to work with people and with his hands. He adds, "I'm getting too broken to do a lot of construction anymore."

A few other men considered or started school in nursing. Justin, who decided upon elementary education with his GI Bill, said he considered nursing before thinking better of it after having an adverse reaction to vomit. William, who had field medical service support school training while in the Navy, tried to use his training to get a job as a medical assistant after discharge, but he said, "none of that counts, you still have to go back and get re-trained on whatever." He opted for a job at a car dealership that was immediately available, and he ended up never pursuing healthcare. Jeff, who went on to become a master carpenter, initially enrolled in school locally to start a nursing degree, "but I had a lot of doubts about that, and uh, decided to um, withdraw." Jerry, among the youngest in the study at age 21, enrolled in the local branch campus initially as a pre-nursing major but switched to business:

> I went to pre-nursing… because I've heard a lot of good stuff about nursing industry or the healthcare industry just they're being in demand. It's a wide variety of possible jobs for nurses. And so like, "What the hell? Let's get money." So that's why I did it, and then I did that for a year, I just now switched to business management…

Scott, a military veteran who has mostly worked in fast food, took steps to work at a nursing home, but nothing came of it when the facility did not stay in touch:

> Um, actually, um when our store manager left, um, I was actually applying to the Manor [a local nursing home], um, so I was gonna do like, nursing, I guess. But uh, um, they were waiting on my background check, and for a company that said

> they really liked work history, because men tend to leave jobs very often. Um, they really want me to, they just never really kept in touch with me, so...

While nothing came of it, Scott said he thought starting at the nursing home would be the door to other opportunities: "I thought maybe if I started there, then I could become the next step in the nursing, the nursing neighborhood, and actually get into like, a hospital." And while prospective plans must be taken with a grain of salt, Brad—who is a recovering opioid addict and currently receives SSDI—said he would like to go back to school for nursing: "I like helping people."

Casey is the one man in the sample who worked in healthcare but left the profession. He did not pursue the profession as much as he was put up to it by a family member, who put in an application on his behalf to attend a CNA class without his knowledge. He was working for $10 an hour doing landscaping and small repairs for an RV dealership when he got a call inviting him to participate. He describes his experience:

> I took that class and I passed the top of the class after being told by the head nurse that was in charge of it that she didn't see me making it past the second week because I walked in as this big "redneck" kid who belonged in a garage somewhere, you know, and I've dealt with that stereotype all my life.

Although it is not possible to confirm his account of the reception of the "head nurse", it is clear throughout the interview that Casey embraced his "country" side but also sought to transcend it. But once he was introduced to the idea of working as a CNA, he embraced the work fully:

> Yep, my motivation for getting into it—after I realized that I was actually smart enough to do it—was that I've always really loved to help people in some form or another. I love people. I love helping them. I love just being there with them, you know, and for that reason, I was very motivated to stick with it for a while. And after I got into it, one of the things that kept me going was—as our society puts these people in these homes—the families leave and they don't come back, and those people not only lost the life that they knew, but now they're all alone. And

> being a CAN, you have that opportunity to walk in to their room and to be that family that walked out on them and to stay and to love them.

Despite his passion for the job, his time as a CNA was short. He said he lost fifteen residents in his first year, but the final straw was when he had to try and resuscitate his grandfather, with whom he lived. The personal trauma of experiencing his grandfather's death, especially with his role trying to help him, led Casey to leave the field of healthcare completely.

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While relatively few men in the study have taken jobs as entry-level healthcare workers or pursued the education needed to qualify for higher-paying healthcare work, that misses the men who considered such paths or even took initial steps toward such careers. Further, there is evidence within these interviews that at least some gendered barriers to these jobs are weakening, at least in the rhetoric many men used about pink-collar jobs. When the issue of being willing to work in a pink-collar job was raised in the interview, the only objections concerned the duties required of the position, not the nature of the job itself. For example, Zach—who dropped out of art school and works as a graphic designer and tattoo artist—said he "wouldn't have anything against that" but he doesn't see himself as "really good with hands on health care stuff."[46] And Jordan replied, "a couple of my best friends are guys that are nurses and it gets, gets to a point where, uh, acclimated in that, um, so yeah." But for a man like Corey, he grounded his response in his own masculinity, which he said was secure enough to handle such work:

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46 While this comment could be construed as a rejection of health care work, hen set in context with the first quote, I take Zach to be saying that while he is not opposed to health care work, he does not think it fits his interests or gifts.

"I wouldn't think twice [about working in a female-dominated job]; I don't care. I know I'm a man, you know."

Paul, who worked for years in manual labor and now mans the front desk for a drug and alcohol rehab facility, spoke at some length about his feelings toward those who see his work as gendered:

> In a way, really what I do now, I answer phones all day. I... I get, I answer the phones so much, and like I said, I don't think this way, but for somebody else you know, you know, some of the older men that I work with, the drivers, they're kind of rough around the edges. And one guy in particular, you know, "Where's your skirt at?", you know? "Listen, buddy, I'll show you where my skirt's at," you know? You know, but let me tell you, what if I ever, you know, you're… that thinking, they... I don't pull any punches with anybody. That thinking, I'll put it in place every time. And there's no place for it anymore. There was never a place for it period. Um... and as I said, I'm not gonna let you get away with it and me, I don't care, but it's that type of thinking that takes women that could probably do your job better than you, feeling uncomfortable, demoralizes them and I ain't gonna let you do it. You have daughters, you have mothers, you have aunt, grandmother, how'd you like it if you watched somebody do that to them? And I have four daughters, and my youngest one will put you in your place, too. So, I'm not gonna let it happen.

These instances of men showing an openness to female-dominated jobs—even standing up for women in the workplace like Paul—could be seen as examples of social desirability bias, but even if we grant that as the case, it is notable that men were influenced enough by a prevailing sense of gender awareness to moderate their responses. But as we see in quotes from men like Casey and Paul, there is an effort here among at least of the men to redefine masculinity to incorporate these types of jobs traditionally done by women, giving evidence that men might be doing more than "doing masculinity and appropriating femininity" (Pullen and Simpson 2009), but perhaps redefining masculinity.

This is where the experience of Phil, the registered nurse, is instructive. He spoke at some length of his experience as a male nurse in rural northwestern Pennsylvania. He describes a culture where there are only two options for men: "It's kind of funny because northwestern PA is such a strange area in terms of human sexuality and gender views and everything like that. It's like, you either wear camo or you're gay. That's essentially the mindset of the people around here." Phil describes himself as not being attracted to the hunting culture, instead seeing himself as "an artsy, music, and poetry and literature type of person." He did not listen to country music, preferring rock and roll and following pop culture. Influenced musically and in fashion by some of the guitarists he liked, he would wear pink shirts or skinny jeans and be questioned by peers and his family. ("That's gay" or "You look like a girl"). Although not gay himself, he says he sometimes got covert requests to meet up from closeted men in the area.

Because of his experience navigating gender growing up, Phil said nursing school did not bother him, but he still called it "an extreme experience." Of the 36 people who started in his class, there were three men: two straight, one gay. Fourteen of the 36 gradated: twelve women, two men. This gender disparity has carried forward into his work as a nurse:

> So, like my peers throughout college were so strange because here I am, a seventeen-, eighteen-year-old kid, sitting with these thirty-year-old women. It's just bizarre. It's a very strange mix. Then the same thing in the workplace for me today. I work with late-twenties to sixty-year-old women. There's two other male nurses at the hospital.

Phil says his coworkers "have never made a deal about me being a male nurse", but gendered expectations crop up at work. Some concern patient expectations, such as how he is often mistaken for a doctor, even after he explains he's a nurse. Conversely, he

sees patients, especially older ones, often surprised when the doctor is a woman. In the carrying out of his duties, sometimes female patients who require toileting prefer a female nurse. But he also describes how there are unwritten rules about who treats which case: “It’s kind of funny, like in the ER, like if there’s a male gender urinary problem that comes in, like it’s just kind of understood like that’s my patient. Female genital or urinary problem that comes in, that’s, you know, one of the other nurses’ patients.” In reflecting on how gender might play out at work, he also realized—in the act of speaking—that he is not sure the legality of one of the hospital’s rules:

> I was told when I got hired there—I don’t even know if this is legal, but I was told when I got hired there that I wasn’t allowed to work in OB because I was a male. They didn’t let males work in OB there. I don’t know. I was like nineteen at the time, I had no interest in working in OB anyway, so I was like, “Okay. That’s fine.” But come to think of it now, I don't know if that’s really even... if that’s legal, but.

Finally, while several men who work in healthcare or considered it mentioned financial reasons, we see in these interview quotes that men also often mention that they enjoy the work and see it as fulfilling. There is evidence that a growing number of men are entering nursing (Munnich and Wozniak 2017), and if female-dominated sectors continue and produce middle-skill, middle-wage jobs (Cottingham 2013; Dill et al. 2016), there is some possibility for more men to consider these fields. Jerry, the 21-year old who first pursued nursing because he “heard a lot of good stuff about nursing industry or the healthcare industry just they’re being in demand”, has gotten the message of the potential financial rewards to such careers. And the lack of overtly sexist pushback against these jobs and careers, while a low bar, is some indication of slow cultural change. More optimistically, at least some men seem to be rethinking masculinity in ways that includes jobs not traditionally done by men.

But we also see in the examples of Phil, Alex, Gary, and Casey some reasons why continued movement of men into female-dominated healthcare occupations might still be slow. Phil has found support at work but faced gendered resistance at home and elsewhere—if not to his occupational choice per say—then at least to deviations from a particular understanding of rural masculinity. And while Phil makes almost $30 an hour—wages that place him among the top-fifth of men in this study—he does not make more than others in the study who still work traditional, blue-collar occupations. Further, in order to get his "good job," Phil needed to successfully complete five semesters of higher education and take on $20,000 of student loan debt, things not possible or preferred by many men in the study. Short of earning at least an associate degree, the options in entry-level healthcare are perhaps less appealing, at least on wage grounds alone. While Alex's pay and rate of promotion are perhaps unusually low, Gary seems to be near the top of the market for healthcare jobs that don't require formal credentials, and he earns the equivalent of about $26,000 per year, barely enough to pull a family of four above the poverty line and comparable to many of the traditional blue-collar jobs in the area. Given the remaining cultural cost for some men to switch careers and the availability of at least some traditional work that pays well, it may take even more time and further erosion of male-dominated occupations to push more men into female-dominated jobs.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the ways in which rural, working-class men do—and do not—seek to improve their labor market positions. The evidence presented in this chapter

shows that men are often doing more to improve their labor market position than existing accounts allow, but there are misunderstandings about why working-class men adopt the strategies they do. First, I find that a majority of men in this study have pursued some sort of postsecondary education or training; however, rather than seeing these decisions in purely market-based terms as means to improve their labor market positions, many men use education and training as a way to explore vocational interests at a time of life when many of their college-going peers are doing the same and in a world without a dominant local employer that obviates vocational exploration. Some men do not have the opportunity for such exploration, as life circumstances expedite their entries into the labor market or their own choices limit opportunities for vocational exploration. This "winding path" toward adulthood can cause some men get off track in ways that costs them in the long term, but most of them manage to land on their feet. Important for understanding these men's approaches to post-secondary education and training is the way in which rurality and masculinity intersect in the identities of the men in this sample. Post-secondary education is a means to strengthen—not create distance from—working-class vocation. Additionally, these men see education as a means to an end, not an end in itself: pursuit of education is most often to gain a practical skill or trade that can be transferred in an immediate and obvious way to the labor market, something especially true in rural places where formal educational credentials are sometimes less valuable than personal trust and practical knowledge.

Second, I find that almost as common as upskilling were men who have taken one of a set of what I call *mobility measures* to improve their labor market opportunities. Despite evidence that Americans in general are moving less for work, I argue that

looking at out-of-state moves is too limiting when trying to understand the ways in which men use geographic mobility to improve their labor market prospects. This narrow view neglects those who enlist in the military and take jobs that require travel. The most common type of move among the men in this study is what I call a *prospecting trip,* where men move without a job in search of better opportunities. These moves often lack a plan or any meaningful employment connections in the new location, so these episodes are often short-lived. But short of moving, many men take other *mobility measures* to improve their labor market position like enlisting in the military or taking jobs that require travel, such as long-haul truck driving or working on an itinerant work crew. These jobs, while relatively well-paying, often have detrimental effects on partners and families, whom these men must leave for long stretches at a time (Viscelli 2016). Yet I also find that even men who leave are usually drawn back to the area, often by a combination of attachment to family and love of rural place, evidence of a "stickiness of place" that supersedes any marginal increase in earning opportunities elsewhere, a picture counter to that which depicts those who remain in rural areas are having failed to escape (Carr and Kefalas 2009). Men express this "stickiness" both affirmatively in recitation of aspects of what has been called the rural idyll (Bell 2006), and negatively in their characterizations of urban space as expensive and potentially dangerous, which plays at least in part on racialized stereotypes. Notably, some men stay in the area due to obligations to custodial and noncustodial children. Among the cases, a few men express interest in leaving the area in the future, but most men are content in rural place, even if it means fewer employment opportunities.

Third, I find that while few men have actually worked nontraditional jobs, quite a few have considered it, and almost none express hostility to the idea in theory. While the absolute penetration of men into some female-dominated occupations lags (England 2010; Wootton 1997), evidence from this study indicates that men have considered such jobs and have even taken preliminary steps toward them, even if they end up not following through. These findings suggest that we may be closer to a tipping point with some occupations than occupational data suggest. This said, the few men in this study who are in female-dominated occupations testify to some resistance from family and peers, indicating that certain cultural barriers remain entrenched, perhaps particularly in rural America, where a type of "country boy" masculinity is more pronounced (Campbell, Bell, and Finney 2006). Additionally, given the remaining cultural cost for some men to switch careers and the availability of at least some traditional work that pays well, it may take even more time and decimation of less-skilled, male-dominated occupations to push more men into female-dominated jobs.

CHAPTER 4: GOOD AND BAD(ISH) JOBS FOR WORKING-CLASS MEN IN RURAL AMERICA

Thirty-three years old, Dennis is a working-class man doing well in rural America. Born and raised in northwestern Pennsylvania, Dennis enlisted in the Marines after high school. His older brother had enlisted before him, although Dennis says his decision was more in response to a challenge from his father about him being undisciplined than the example of his brother. Dennis initially thought the military might be a career, but he says that his deployment to the Middle East after the events of 9/11 cured him of that aspiration. He fulfilled his four-year commitment and returned to northwestern Pennsylvania without a plan. Once home, he learned of a nearby technical school, so Dennis—with the benefit of living at home, plus his savings from the military and six months of unemployment insurance—used his GI Bill to pursue a welding and fabrication credential. After eighteen months, Dennis had earned a specialized associate degree, and with the help of the school, he secured a job immediately after graduation at a local manufacturer making $18.50 per hour. He worked there for a couple years, but the parent company closed the plant where Dennis worked, leaving Dennis again without a job or a plan. A longtime family friend, who worked for the electric utility, suggested that Dennis apply. Dennis began the process of attaining the necessary pre-qualifications, but when the workers went on strike, all hiring stopped, again putting a roadblock in Dennis' path. However, the family friend learned that the rural cooperative utility[47] was hiring, so

47 Rural electrical cooperatives, more common in the Western United States, were often started by farmers to provide utility service to hard-to-reach rural places that were underserved by for-profit utility companies. Member-owned and voluntarily, co-ops provide a tenure and promotion structure similar to traditional unions.

Dennis turned his attention there. He recalls being the first person interviewed, and he was asked why they should skip the stack of applications and just hire him. He doesn't remember his exact response, but he must have made an impression, because they called the next day and offered him the job.

At the cooperative, Dennis started as an apprentice at $17 per hour, and his pay increased as he gained more training and experience. He has received regular wage increases connected to his progress in the apprenticeship program, other incentives, and cost-of-living increases. Seven years later, Dennis now makes almost $40 per hour and earns an additional $20,000 to $30,000 a year in overtime pay, which puts his annual earnings in the low six-figure range, an impressive amount given his relatively young age and the low cost of living of the area. Dennis recently bought a small working farm, but his real passion is being outdoors, hunting and fishing. Dennis' latest project is building an addition onto his house that will serve as a showroom for his many hunting trophies. Although situations can change, Dennis is a working-class man making a good living in rural America.

* * *

The conventional wisdom is that life in rural America is difficult and unforgiving—even undesirable (Adamy and Overberg 2017; Overberg and Calderon 2017). Chronic poverty and underemployment have long been greater in rural America than urban America (Cromartie 2017; Findeis and Jensen 1998; Jensen et al. 1999), and rural workers are more likely than urban workers to slip from adequate employment into underemployment; less likely to move out of marginal jobs into adequate employment (Jensen et al. 1999); and less likely to move from part-time to fulltime work (Findeis and

Jensen 1998). In short, there are a lack of good jobs in rural America (Findeis and Jensen 1998), and it can be challenging to make an adequate living in at least some parts of rural America. Yet focusing on the relative disadvantages of rural places suggests that very few have managed to do well. In this chapter, I examine the work experiences of rural men by dividing men into two groups: those who have "good jobs" that pay at least $15 an hour, and those who don't. Contrary to conventional wisdom that good jobs in rural America are rare, almost one-third of the men in the study have good jobs, including a dozen men who earn an effective hourly rate of at least $25. For the men in good jobs, I identify three themes among their jobs: they are mostly in traditional, blue-collar occupations and industries; they tend to be unionized; and many of the jobs are professional or managerial. In many cases, it is a combination of these factors that makes a real difference in earnings. Dennis' story illustrates a couple of the characteristics that were typical of those who were successful: he worked in blue-collar occupation and was a union member.[48] Overall, the stories of the men in this study with good jobs offers a window into a rural America of gainful employment, living wages, and working-class careers.

But while many men in the study had good jobs, a majority of the men did not. Some of the men once had good jobs but no longer do, while others have never managed to navigate their way into higher-paying work. While some of the men's wages have been perennially low, more common among the men are those whose wages seem to stall between $10 and $15 an hour in what I call bad(ish) jobs. These jobs are not the most

48 Dennis also had military service and earned an associate degree, and while those characteristics are arguably useful in the labor market, they were not clearly correlated with labor market success among men in this study.

poorly paid, but they generally lack opportunities for predictable advancement or assurance of measurable wage gains over time. I identify four dynamics of this low*er*-wage labor market: 1) the job carousel, in which men move laterally among jobs that pay comparably but struggle to find opportunities to advance; 2) chutes and ladders, which describes the fact that there is often not a clear-line path of wage improvement, as almost half of men at one point made more than they currently do; 3) the steel ceiling, the working-class version of the glass ceiling, in which men find their wages stagnating, even after years of service to the same employer; and 4) not management material, the fact that some men desire advancement but are deemed not to be suitable managers by their employers, often compelling men to make lateral moves to other occupations or industries. A final group of men make up what I call the downwardly mobile, which are those with greater earning power who have chosen not to use it or those whose hourly wages are not reflective of their true labor market position. While Chapter 3 described how men have tried to improve their labor market prospects, this chapter utilizes these men's labor force narratives to offer insight into the ways men have—and have not—managed to find and keep good jobs.

Literature Review

Employment for Working-Class Men in Rural America

Much of rural America faces stiff economic headwinds. Employment opportunities in rural America have generally been worse than those in urban America (Slack 2007), and in rural places, work has provided less protection from poverty (Slack 2010). Rural workers have long contended with working poverty (Lichter, Johnston, and

McLaughlin 1994), as well as various forms of underemployment (Jensen et al. 1999; Slack and Jensen 2002) and nonstandard employment (McLaughlin and Coleman-Jensen 2008). Older research shows that jobs in rural areas pay less for comparable work and offer less return for human-capital endowments (McLaughlin and Perman 1991), and rural wage growth continues to be slower than urban growth (Cromartie 2017). While gains in manufacturing in rural America helped offset employment losses due to agricultural consolidation in the waning decades of the twentieth century (Albrecht and Albrecht 2000; Lobao and Meyer 2001), early twenty-first century labor markets in rural America nonetheless came to be dominated by service-sectors jobs (Gibbs and Kusmin 2005) that were disproportionately low-quality. (For a summary of rural economic restructuring, see Chapter 9 in Tickamyer, Warlick, and Sherman 2017). There is evidence that rural America benefitted less in terms of absolute poverty reduction from the surging economy of the late 1990s (Gundersen 2006), and more recently, rural America has been slower than urban America to recover jobs lost during the Great Recession (Cromartie 2017). There is also evidence for the so-called "brain drain" from rural America, in which higher-skilled workers have left for more plentiful and lucrative opportunities elsewhere (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Domina 2006), leaving behind a rural population with lower average levels of education (Beaulieu and Mulkey 1995).

In their assessment of the employment situation of rural men in particular, Jensen and Jensen (2011) find that rural men lag behind their urban counterparts in several employment indicators, including labor force participation and employment, and rural men have greater rates of underemployment and working poverty than urban men. Yet despite this pessimistic picture of rural male employment, there is emerging evidence that

employment in rural America is not as dire as certain depictions suggest. Manufacturing, which tends to pay better than the service sector (Mishel 2018), makes up a greater percentage of jobs in rural America (Cromartie 2017) and has been slower to recede in rural places when compared with urban America (Low 2017), which helps explain why rural men are less likely than urban men to have been displaced from their jobs (Jensen and Jensen 2011). Further, low-skill jobs make up a shrinking portion of rural jobs overall (Gibbs, Kusmin, and Cromartie 2004; Young 2013). And although working poverty has long been a mark of rural life (Brown and Hirschl 1995; Jensen, McLaughlin, and Slack 2003; Lichter et al. 1994; Lichter and McLaughlin 1995), rates of those in working poverty have been converging in urban and rural places (Slack 2010).

Upwardly Mobile Pathways in Today's Labor Market

Even with the declines in traditionally male-dominated occupations and industries like manufacturing and construction, these jobs continue to provide low- and middle-skill men with higher wages and better job quality as compared to most other alternative industries and occupations (Andersson et al. 2005; Mishel et al. 2012). For example, Holzer and Lerman (2009) identify a number of prominent middle-skill construction and manufacturing positions which provide decent median annual earnings ($30,000-$70,000 per year) that continue to employ thousands of men in today's labor market, including inspectors, electricians, plumbers, machinists, welders, cutters, and solderers. There may also be advantages for men in some service sector occupations industries in today's economy. Many of the occupations and industries where we see growth are industries that are traditionally dominated by women, not men. These include the health care sector and

education industries (for example, see Nelson and Wolf-Powers (2009) and Parrillo and de Socio (2014) on the growth of "eds and meds"), which expanded during the recent recession while all other industries contracted (Goodman and Mance 2011). Past research has shown that low- and middle-skill men are reluctant to enter these female-dominated industries because of lower pay and prestige (Gatta and Roos 2005; Simpson 2005), but such trends may be changing as these sectors continue and produce middle-skill, middle-wage jobs (Cottingham 2013; Dill et al. 2016).

There is also some evidence that the public sector has remained a source of higher wages, benefits, and job security for low- and middle-skill workers (Autor et al. 2008b; Lee 2004). This is especially true for racial minorities, who have benefited from affirmative action programs in the public sector that have promoted the hiring and retention of racial minorities, although much of the research on minorities in the public sector does not reflect today's labor market (Blank 1985; Collins 1983; Holzer and Neumark 2000). There is also evidence that public sector workers were substantially less likely to lose their jobs during the recession, and protection of the public sector was greater for low-skill workers compared to workers with a college degree (Kopelman and Rosen 2016). And research has shown that union jobs are a source of higher wages and benefits for men without a college degree: Mishel (2012) reports that the union premium earned by those who belong to a union is 17.8 percent for men without a college degree. Finally, Katherine Newman's (2006) qualitative work among low-skilled workers in New York City in the 1990s and early 2000s identified paths of upward mobility for the highest achieving group included landing a union job.

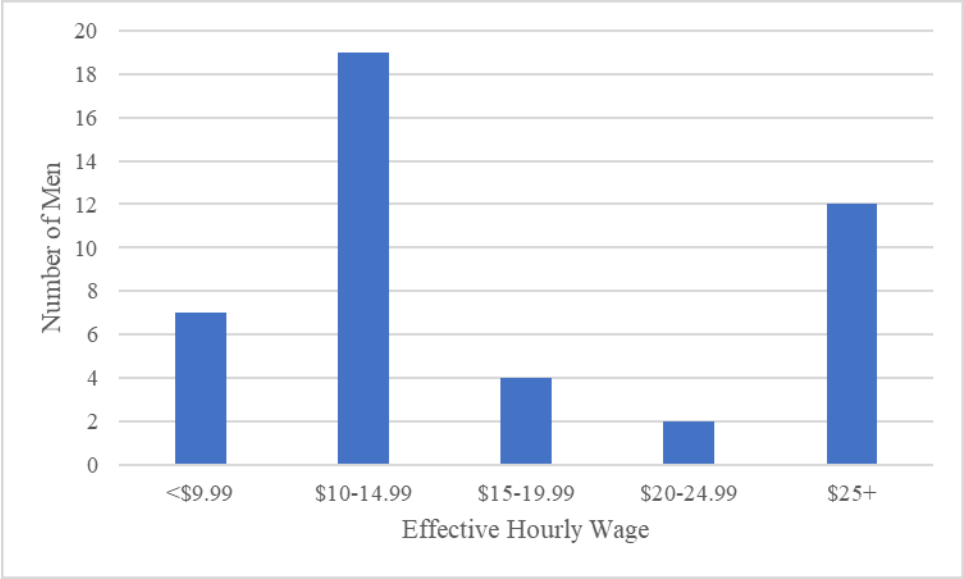
Findings and Analysis

To provide perspective on the men in this study with good jobs, I first set them in context of all the working men in the study. Figure 1 shows the effective hourly wage[49] for all men who worked for pay at the time of the interview.[50] Of those 44 men, seven (16%) earned less than $10 an hour; 19 of 44 (43%) earned between $10.00 and $14.99 an hour; four of 44 (9%) earned between $15.00 and $19.99; and 14 of 44 (32%) earned at least $20.00 an hour. Although not much should be extrapolated from this distribution given the small sample size and nonrandom nature of the cases, a few observations are possible. First, there is not an even distribution of wages. A relatively paucity of men earns below $10.00 an hour or between $15.00 and $20.00 an hour, but almost half of the working men make between $10.00 and $15.00 and almost one-third make over $20.00 an hour. Regarding the lower earners, there are relatively few men making below $10 an hour, and only one man in the study literally makes the minimum wage. Conversely, over one-quarter of the men make at least $25 an hour, which equates to an annual salary of over $50,000, twice the poverty line for a family of four and within reach of the U.S. median household income.[51] It should be kept in mind that Figure 1 excludes 17 men in the study: six men live primarily on SSI or SSDI, and another ten men had no work-related income at the time of the interview because they were either unemployed or not in

49 In some cases, the men were paid by the hour and had an actual hourly rate. In cases where they worked for salary, by the job, or were paid in some other way, I calculated an estimated hourly rate based on 40 hours a week for 52 weeks per year.
50 This excludes those men who were unemployed or whose primary income came in the form of disability benefits, even if they worked on the side.
51 The Real Median Household Income in the United States was $61,372 in September 2018.

the labor force. I lack income information for one man because he did not reveal it during the interview despite several attempts to determine that information.

Figure 4.1: Effective Hourly Wage of Working Men (N=44)



Men with Good Jobs

A number of definitions and dimensions are used to conceptualize job quality, including pay and benefits, skill, autonomy, and overall job satisfaction (Green 2006; Handel 2005; Kalleberg 2011; McGovern, Smeaton, and Hill 2004; Schmitt and Jones 2012). What is a "good job" for low- and middle-skill workers in today's economy? For simplicity, in this chapter I focus exclusively on wages.[52] Kalleberg (2011) argues that while there is some individual variation in whether a job is "good" or "bad," most people

52 Men's subjective experiences of their jobs, including whether they think their jobs are "good", are explored in Chapter 5.

agree that compensation and benefits are central components of job quality and a sense of dignity at work (Bolton 2007; Hodson 2001; Sayer 2007). I measure job quality using a baseline threshold of $15 per hour as a "good wage" for low- and middle-skill worker. This threshold is meaningful due to the "Fight for $15" living wage movement over the past four years (Greenhouse 2016) and its success in establishing $15 as a threshold for a dignified hourly wage (Meyerson 2014).[53]

As seen in Figure 1, eighteen men in the study who worked for pay at the time of the interview made at least $15 per hour, which represents 41 percent of the working men in this study and 30 percent of the men in the study overall for whom I have income information. If I include among those with good jobs one man who was unemployed at the time of the interview but who had accepted a job that will pay him in the high $40,000s and another man who declined to reveal his income but owns a successful local business, the number of men earning at least $15 per hour rises to 20, which is 45 percent of the working men and almost exactly one-third of the men overall in the study overall. As seen in Figure 1, of the men with good jobs, four earned between $15 and $19.99, two earned between $20 and $24.99, and twelve had actual or estimated hourly rates of at least $25 per hour. Among those high earners, four men earned an average of more than $30 per hour.

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53 The $15-an-hour minimum wage movement began with strikes by fast food workers in 2012 and 2013 (Luce 2015; Tung, Lathrop, and Sonn 2015). In the short time since those strikes, many localities have passed a $15 minimum wage, and it is likely to be a key part of the 2020 Democratic presidential primary (Romeo 2019). The decision to choose $15 as the specific target of these strikes was based on intuition more than empirical research (Luce 2015), and some scholars have raised concerns about the impact of a $15 an hour wage on the poorest workers (Holzer 2015a). However, Desmond (2019) recently argued that not only does a $15-an-hour minimum wage improve lives, it saves them through many positive externalities for health and well-being that increased income has been shown to have for workers and their families.

Given the popular perception of rural America as experiencing rapid decline (Adamy and Overberg 2017), some may be surprised at the number of men in this sample with good jobs. To set these findings in context, I borrow analysis from an unpublished paper coauthored with Janette Dill[54]. As seen in Table 1, we use the 2004 and 2008 panels of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to look descriptively at differences between low- and middle-skill men living in rural areas as compared to working class men living in metropolitan areas.[55] The mean wage for working class men in rural areas and in metropolitan areas is the same, at about $18.75 per hour. However, a smaller percentage of rural men make at least $20 or $25 per hour (27% and 14%, respectively) as compared to metropolitan men (34% and 21%, respectively). In terms of occupation, rural men are more concentrated in production (20% of rural men as compared to 13% of men living in metropolitan areas). They are less likely to be in white-collar professional, office, or management jobs, or to work in service occupations. Rural men are concentrated in the manufacturing industry (which employs 30% of rural men as compared to 19% men in metropolitan areas). The other major industries where rural men work are construction and retail (17% and 12%, respectively). Rural men compared to metropolitan men have longer tenures in their current job (89 months as compared to 83 months), are less likely to be in a salaried job (27% as compared to 33%), are slightly less likely to be in a unionized job (14% as compared to 16%), and are more likely to have had some military service (17% as compared to 15%). Low- and middle-skill rural men have lower levels of education as compared to the metropolitan

54 Dr. Dill is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Akron.
55 This analysis concerns men in the SIPP with less than a four-year college degree.

counterparts, with lower rates of some college or an associate degree, and they are more likely to be married and have children. Overall, while there are some differences, between rural and urban men, rural men have the same average hourly wage, and nearly 30 percent of rural men make at least $20 an hour.

Table 4.1: Low- and Middle-Skill Workers in Metro and Nonmetro Areas

	Rural Men		Metro Men	
Variable	Obs	Mean	Obs	Mean
Hourly wage	6,357	$18.75	24,216	$18.76
Wage of at least $20	6,357	27.2%	24,216	34.4%*
Wage of at least $25	6,357	14.2%	24,216	20.6%*
Occupation				
Service	6,741	14.0%	25,334	16.7%*
Management	6,741	5.2%	25,334	7.1%*
Professional	6,741	6.5%	25,334	8.2%*
Sales	6,741	6.9%	25,334	8.7%*
Office	6,741	5.3%	25,334	7.8%*
Construction	6,741	15.2%	25,334	15.5%
Installation	6,741	10.4%	25,334	8.8%*
Production	6,741	20.4%	25,334	13.0%*
Transportation	6,741	16.1%	25,334	14.2%*
Industry				
Retail	6,741	12.1%	25,334	13.6%*
Construction	6,741	16.9%	25,334	17.2%
Manufacturing	6,741	29.7%	25,334	18.8%*
Wholesale	6,741	4.5%	25,334	5.1%*
Transportation	6,741	6.9%	25,334	8.1%*
Information	6,741	1.6%	25,334	2.5%*
Professional and business	6,741	1.9%	25,334	2.9%*
Management and administration	6,741	4.4%	25,334	6.8%*
Education	6,741	2.5%	25,334	2.4%
Health care	6,741	3.2%	25,334	4.1%*
Food service	6,741	5.5%	25,334	8.4%*
Other services	6,741	4.0%	25,334	4.6%
Public administration	6,741	6.8%	25,334	5.4%*
Work characteristics				
Tenure in months	6,674	88.8	25,005	83.3*
Salaried job	6,717	26.8%	25,273	32.5%*
Union member	6,717	14.4%	25,273	16.2%*
Military	6,741	16.7%	25,334	15.1%*
Education				
High school degree or less	6,741	59.5%	25,334	53.2%*
Some college	6,741	31.0%	25,334	35.8%*
Associate degree	6,741	9.5%	25,334	11.1%*
Personal characteristics				
18-24	6,741	16.3%	25,334	16.2%
25-44	6,741	48.3%	25,334	50.1%*
45-65	6,741	35.4%	25,334	33.7%*
Married	6,741	58.5%	25,334	53.2%*
Children under 18	6,741	42.3%	25,334	40.6%*

* Indicates significant differences by rural/metro ($p<.05$)

Source: SIPP

Notes: Mean values for the full sample of men include the *first observation* for each respondent in the 2004 and 2008 cohorts of the SIPP

The men in this study who make at least $15 an hour are displayed in Table 2, along with their age, current occupation or industry, and effective hourly wage. The men are arranged by hourly wage from lowest to highest. Several themes emerge from among the men with good jobs. First, most of these men work in traditional blue-collar industries or occupations. Second, many of them belong to public or private sector unions. And third, a number of the men have worked their way into management positions. In the sections that follow, I will explore these three themes, including interrogation of these themes by the use of disconfirming cases in the broader study.

Table 4.2: Men with Effective Hourly Rates of at Least $15 an Hour (N=18)

Name	Age at Time of Interview	Current Occupation or Industry	Effective Hourly Wage
Jeremiah	38	Manufacturing	$15.00
Derek	40	Commercial driver	$16.75
Cameron	33	Self-employed contractor	$17.31
Wes	34	Operations	$19.95
Seth*	40	Manufacturing	$21.65
Phil*	26	Nurse	$24.00
Thomas	32	Self-employed contractor	$25.00
Sean	39	Law enforcement	$26.00
Jacob*	38	Law enforcement	$27.11
Don	43	Oil & gas	$29.00
Jeff*	25	Master carpenter	$29.61
Sam	37	Manufacturing management	$30.29
Dustin*	46	Hospital administration	$31.00
Vince	39	Higher education	$36.06
Dennis*	33	Utilities	$37.50
Austin*	46	Federal government	$44.62
Todd	46	Self-employed	$72.11
Larry	35	Oil & gas	$96.00

* Indicates union member

Blue-Collar Work

The most common jobs among the higher-earning men were in traditional blue-collar fields like manufacturing, natural resource extraction, construction, and law enforcement. Several men with good jobs in this study work in some facet of manufacturing. Despite evidence that rural economies have shifted toward services

(Slack 2014), American manufacturing arguably remains strong (Kliesen and Tatom 2018; Kotkin and Shires 2018), including in some rural areas (Low 2017). All of the men in good-paying manufacturing jobs had worked their way to higher-paying positions over time, something covered later in the chapter when I discuss work trajectories. Sam works in quality control for a local manufacturer; Seth does testing and calibration for a manufacturer that makes products in support of the oil and gas industries; and Jeremiah works in research and development for a manufacturer specializing in injection molding.

Don and Larry both make over $25 per hour in the oil and gas industry, long an important industry in northwestern Pennsylvania, the birthplace of the modern oil industry (Dickey 1959). Don's work keeps him local, as he maintains a few hundred gas wells that he visits weekly. Don has been in the same job for 22 years, which he knows has involved a bit of luck. When gas from the Marcellus shale flooded the market and drove down the price, his company laid off 30 percent of the workers. And just nine months before the interview, Don's company was acquired by another firm, and the new owner cut another 20 to 30 percent of the workforce. As Don says, "we've been cut deep. I'm fortunate to still be there."

While Don has been in the same work in the oil and gas industry for decades, Larry came to his work as a horizontal driller after stints in other fields. After four years in the Army, Larry got a job at the same local manufacturer where he worked in high school. He started at $8.00 an hour and over three years worked up to $12.50, which he says made him one of the top paid people in the company. Larry had an older brother who worked on oil rigs, and his brother often told him about the pay:

> … he tells me what they started out paying. I'm like—which I was making $12.50 at the time—the rig that he was working on started out $14.50, and then $100 [per

> diem]. I'm like, that's pretty awesome, just to show up for work you are getting extra money every day, I'm like, that is great. And, so I started thinking about it.

When he learned about an open position through his brother, Larry made the jump to oil and gas. He started at the bottom and worked his way up, although as he described, his work—like Don's—is subject to broader economic forces: "I worked myself up; it goes floors, motors, dash, drilling, and then rig manager. I got up to drilling, and I was fixing to go to rig manager in then the slow down happen. So, I went from drilling all the way back down to floors within a few months." Larry was ultimately laid off, and he went back to working at a local factory for $11.00 an hour. With overtime at the factory, Larry could make about as much as he did as a floor hand on the rig, although it took him seven days a week: "… it's two weeks on, two weeks off [on the rig]; at the shop, I'm working at is seven days a week. It's not really the same amount of money, but it is, you know?" Still, Larry was unsure about jumping back to oil and gas, so he worked at the shop for a year and waited for drilling to pick back up. He also did not want to start at the bottom again, so his brother helped him come back in as a driller, which pays very well: "So, MWD [measurement while drilling] end up making about $100,000 a year. Directional drillers make about $200,000 a year." Larry got his first directional drilling job about nine months before the interview. Based on his reported income from the last six months of the previous tax year, he is in line to make close to what he was told to expect.

Several of the high-earners work in the construction trades. Thomas and Cameron both are self-employed contractors, whose stories will be told in greater detail below when I discuss self-employment. After working for years for other contractors, often for middling wages, each decided to strike out on his own. Each is responsible for bidding on

jobs and securing contracts, and both have had success in keeping enough work for themselves. As employers, they are responsible for assembling the crew necessary for each job. Even after expenses, each still makes a healthy hourly wage, although there is variability with being self-employed. Jeff is also in the trades as a journeyman carpenter. As a member of his union, he gets jobs from the local union hall and is guaranteed a certain hourly wage. He has been fortunate to have relatively steady work through the union, although he can draw unemployment insurance when he is between jobs. Jacob and Sean both work in law enforcement, jobs where they literally wear blue collars and each make more than $25 an hour. Two men with good jobs work in transportation: Derek is a commercial driver for an industrial laundry company, and Brett owns a local towing company. Wes and Todd make good livings in one of the newer hands-on industries, microbrewing. Todd has made his name on the brewing side, while Wes applies his experience with welding and engine repair to brewery operations. Finally, Dennis works as a lineman for the local public electric utility. Overall, a majority of the men with good jobs have blue-collar employment.

Blue-collar employment by itself is not universally high-paying among men in the study, although all men in the study except one who work in blue-collar occupations make at least $10 an hour. For example, Charles has worked for just a few weeks at a food manufacturing facility where he started at $9.00 an hour, even though he is a line leader. Mark makes $10.95 as an assistant shift supervisor at a facility making industrial products. Casey is a laborer in a steel mill and makes $12.10 an hour. As will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter, tenure is not always enough to move men in blue-collar jobs into “good jobs” territory. Dan, like Casey, works as a general laborer at

a steel plant, where he makes $13.75 an hour after ten years of service. After six years, George makes $12.50 an hour as a machinist at a manufacturing facility. After seven years, Curtis makes $13.50 an hour at a manufacturing facility. Jerry makes $10 an hour as the low man at a custom cabinetry shop.

Union Membership

Several of the men in good jobs are members of public or private sector unions, which overlaps substantially with the men in high-paying blue-collar work. Seth works in a union manufacturing plant; Jeff is part of his local carpenters' union; Dennis, a utility lineman, is part of a cooperative that has union-like characteristics concerning his wages, benefits, promotions, and security; and Jacob is part of a public sector union as a law enforcement officer. But not all union men are in blue-collar work. Phil, who works as a nurse, is part of a union, as is Austin, who served in the Navy and now works as a civilian for the federal government. The only union member in this study who does not make more than $15 an hour is Jeremy, who makes $13.31 an hour working for the state of Pennsylvania as a custodian. Although his wages do not qualify him as having a good job, his position has many other features of a desirable position, including good benefits, a pension, and long-term job security. His hourly rate, while still relatively modest, is almost twice the minimum wage, but the benefits make the job worthwhile in his eyes:

> Benefits are real good. That is one of the main reasons why I'm still there. My benefits cover the full family, including my two step-children, my two step-daughters. My union benefits, well my union dues and things like that, my medical benefits that includes health, vision, dental, prescription, the whole nine yards.

Not only do the men in unionized jobs benefit from higher current wages, they also started at much higher wages than their non-union peers and have more robust and regular raises. Dennis, a lineman for the public utility, took a cut in pay from his previous work in manufacturing when he started, but the advancement has been robust:

> I would say, I think when I started, I actually took about a dollar an hour cut. In 2009, when I started as a ground man, I want to say I made like $17-something an hour. And then, as a first-year apprentice, it probably went up $2, $2 or $3, and then, it progressed $2 or $3 every – every year, which raises the floor of the current and future earnings.

He continues, "When I hit journeyman four years ago, we made $33.50 an hour, and then in the last four years, it still goes up a couple of dollars a year." He now makes $37.50 with ample opportunity for overtime.

Seth, who works in manufacturing, has increased his pay by a combination of seeking shift incentives and bidding for internal promotions: "And then, if you worked second shift, it was a dollar shift premium. If you worked third shift, it was $1.25. So, I worked, I'll take that $1.25, so I always worked third shift. And then, every year there was an incremental pay raise. You know, it went from like 15.65 to 15.90." But Seth also benefitted from already having a "good job" when he started in the stockroom, making more on his first day that many of the men in this study have ever made, even after years with the same employer. Once he had his foot in the door, Seth was easily able to bid for other jobs:

> The job I'm in now is pay grade 8. And that was a huge thing about switching jobs, was like 3.60 more an hour. So, I went from the stockroom to what we call the test area, and it was three dollars more an hour just like that. And then, once I trained and went on the off shift, it was another raise. And then we just had a new, we just did a five-year contract.

He explains his improvement in pay after just five years with the company:

> So, from the time I started there in 2012 with 15.65, to where I am now, with my new raise, it's 21.65 and they pay me $1.10 to work second shift. Actually, pay me just a smidgen more. So, I can't complain with what's happened to me there in five years.

And he also has great benefits. His employer matches his 401(k) up to 7%, plus he has had full benefits from the first day on the job: "With full benefits from the day I started. Not, there was no probation, nothing like that. The day I started I got full benefits, a week and a half vacation, two sick days, and that was my very first day."

Similar to Dennis and Seth, Phil began with a "good job" and has had ways to enhance his wage through a combination of wage and has ways to enhance his already generous wage. Phil, who works as a registered nurse, describes how his base pay has increased over time:

> Um, and you can get other certifications that bump your pay, but right now without anything—without including anything that bumps my pay, I think I'm around twenty-four dollars an hour. Um, after seven years. So, nineteen to twenty-four. I'm up about five dollars an hour in seven years.

Phil also takes advantage of a number of the ways he can enhance his pay. As in manufacturing, Phil gets extra pay for working second or third shift. He also earns extra when he is the "charge nurse" in the ER or ICU, which means added responsibilities for patient assessment and triage. Phil also maintains several medical certifications that also raise his pay. While his base pay is around $24 an hour, he is usually making more: "Sometimes it's around twenty-seven, twenty-eight, depending on what's going on, if I'm in charge and it's a night shift, which I pretty much always work the night shift." Regarding his shifts, Phil has an arrangement with the hospital where he works thirty-six hours but still is considered fulltime for the purposes of benefits. Phil generally works

twelve-hour shifts and usually gets them spaced as he would like. He defends the difficulty of his work:

> And it's a little different, too because—I always tell my wife, like I feel like it would be different like if I were working in like a factory or like McDonald's or something, I don't think it would be quite as hard, but there's just such a high risk and liability with nursing because you have—I can't be tired when I go to work, you know? I have to like pay attention to the patients' vital signs and what's—especially ER and ICU. You're working with more critical patients. So, those long six twelves in a row was just like super stressful. Um, because I know a lot of people welders and stuff like that will put in eighty hours a week and they're like, "Aw, you're a wimp." It's like, "Well, I'm sure your job is hard, too, but you probably can't get sued for—if you mess up a welding job."

Jeff, a journeyman carpenter with the Greater Pennsylvania Regional Council of Carpenters, has worked his way through the union apprenticeship program. He explains the process:

> Um, basically start out at a certain rate, and if you complete full, uh all of your classes, have all of your dues paid, and fill out a report card, um then you are eligible, and have thirteen hundred working hours in per year, you get, uh, bumped second year level, third year level, so on.

He recalls that his first job paid about $18 an hour, which included extra pay given the nature of the work: "I was twenty years old and it was great. Like I would get a check for this and then an extra check because it was deemed heavy highway." He works with his union hall to land jobs but can also solicit his own work, although he needs to manage the politics of the union: "All that to say, I had asked my business agent if I could go do that because I'm allowed to solicit my own work, but if I piss off my business agent, there's a chance that he'll play games and, 'No, I don't have anything for you.'" Jeff says his wage for a given job is pegged to the county; right now, he makes $29.61 an hour doing a remodel of a high school, work that is not glamorous: "Um, I'm working for a general contractor, so doing a lot of concrete and gross stuff, stuff that

makes you wish you would have went to school." Jeff admitted he wasn't totally clear on union operations and talked at length about some of the union politics, but he still ultimately saw value in what they do for him:

> Um what, with um, the idea of being in a union from what I understand, is basically you have somebody backing you and you have a kind of like a rule book you can go by that keeps the contractors accountable or that keeps you accountable. Um, basically just work as hard as you can, as hard as you want to, and hope you stay on for a long amount of time.

Jacob, a law enforcement officer in a public sector union who earns almost $30 an hour, sums up the benefits of the union succinctly: "Benefits, shift differential, uh, overtime if you can pick it up, longevity." For Jacob, the only downside is that because the job is so attractive, especially for the area, few men ever leave unless they retire or die, which makes opportunities for advancement few and far between. As I will explore in more detail below, the promotion structure of union work is virtually absent among the non-union men in this study. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the ways in which these union men, despite benefitting from the union, still sometimes have suspicions and questions about the role of unions overall.

Management

Finally, several of the high-earning men were self-employed or worked in managerial or professional roles. Thomas and Cameron are both self-employed contractors. While moving into business for themselves introduced more risk and responsibility, it also allowed both men to increase their earnings. Thomas learned masonry from his Dad and grandfather and carpentry from a man he worked for in high school. Thomas liked working with his hands and did not see himself going to college.

He started at the bottom, working as a laborer while still in high school for around $7.00 an hour. After high school, he got a job in the carpentry division for a hospitality company making $12.50 an hour, but he did not like the work. In subsequent construction jobs, he made better money and worked his way up, but as he describes, there is a cap to what he could make if he was working for someone else:

> I started with him at like fourteen. Right away, it was bumped up. Just kept bumping out 'til I hit like a twenty-dollar cap. Around here, twenty bucks working for somebody, is like… twenty to twenty-five max. That's your max cap unless you're doing your own work, so that's what I hit. I'm turning down work. I don't want to be at that point of turning it down when I know I can do it myself. So finally, it was just a number of things that drove me to that, but it's like yeah, man. I'll try it and see what happens. That was three years ago.

Thomas usually runs a three-man crew; he prefers to stay small to avoid what he sees as some of the headaches or running bigger crews. He makes more on average than he did when he was working for others, but he also has responsibility for finding work and negotiating on behalf of him and his crew:

> My wages, they vary. Depends on who I work for. If I work for a buddy or if I see somebody that's not doing well, I'll work with them, you know what I mean? I'm not saying, "Oh, that guy makes bank, I'm going to charge extra." It's not the case, but if I know of somebody that's financially struggling, I'll do what I can to help. A lot of times, I'll set it up on an hourly wage, and I don't make money on my guys usually. Here's their wages. Here's my wages. We'll do an hourly wage if you want to do it that way. If you want me to bid it, you're probably going to pay more, and I can do that, too. It's usually anywhere from thirty to twenty. I don't need to get rich. I just want to pay my bills, and I'll be happy with that.

The story is similar with Cameron, who also worked in construction for others for many years before going out on his own. He started at the bottom: "Just doing labor, you know, I'll pay you $7 an hour or whatever it was." Over the years, he has worked for a variety of places making in the $11-12 an hour range. Eventually, Cameron caught on

with a contractor and worked his way up to $17 an hour before feeling like he needed more:

> Um, and so, you know, like I said, it's five, five or six years in. I started feeling like, um, like there was more like I was kind of like maxed out of my current position, like I didn't want to be hands on for another 30 years, kind of… kind of a thing. Um, getting older, you know, body doesn't recuperate quite as fast. It requires a little bit more, uh, sleep, different things, time to recuperate. So, um, you know, I just started thinking about these days, thinking about, you know, now I'm at a point where we've got a serious girlfriend, you know, settling down in life, um, you know, uh, just needing, um needing to explore like, beyond…

Cameron approached his boss and was granted a raise up to $23 an hour, which kept him on board for another year and a half. At that point, Cameron's issue was less about the money than with not having responsibility of seeing the big picture. He approached his boss again, and this time, his boss offered Cameron the chance to buy him out. Cameron saw it as a generous offer, but he also figured he had enough contacts to go on his own without taking on the debt of buying an existing company. Cameron, like Thomas, talked at great length about what has gone into being a self-employed contractor, including challenges with finding crew, advertising, and competition.[56] Cameron had one year where he made $78,000 after expenses, but last year, it was just $36,000. The increased potential for earning also comes with risk:

> Um, because I can have a banner month and then I can have, you know, where I don't make hardly anything at all. And uh, and honestly if—you know, that you have those negative months where if I don't have a job for the guy, my employee for a week, I'm a paying job, then I create something for him to do because if I lay him off, my unemployment rate goes up, and if I don't give him work then he gets unhappy and leaves.

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56 Both Thomas and Cameron mentioned the challenge of competing with the Amish, who also do general contracting. According to Thomas and Cameron, the Amish do not have to pay workers compensation or unemployment compensation, which means they can underbid contractors for whom those are legally required.

Thomas said you do your best to prepare for those times: “Summers pick up, of course. You’ll pick up college help or high school help in the summers. It tends to be... like I said, you make hay while the sun shines. Tuck it away and save it for a rainy day. That’s pretty much the name of the game.”

Brett is an example of someone in another industry who made the decision to move from employee to employer. Always entrepreneurial, Brett was moonlighting as a heavy equipment operator even in high school, having bought his own mini-backhoe for hire. After high school, he worked a series of jobs for different companies in different industries, but he always operated heavy equipment, from backhoes to log skidders to forklifts to frontend loaders. Yet most of the jobs paid less than $10 an hour. His longest job, where he worked for an excavation company, only paid him $11.50 after four years of service. Brett knew that one of the local towing companies was not doing well, and he saw a business opportunity. He started with one wrecker, and eight years later, the company employs eight people and did nearly a million dollars in gross sales last year. Brett insists he doesn’t know his salary—he says that stuff is handled by their business manager—but presumably he makes more than the $11.50 per hour he made operating equipment at his previous employer.

Other high-earners work in professional or managerial positions. Dustin, for example, worked his way up from a technician into hospital management. He began as a mobile X-ray technician, and after five years, he took an opportunity to become a mobile MRI technician. As part of a mobile unit, Dustin built a network of relationships with hospitals and facilities around the region. When one of the hospitals purchased an MRI machine, they hired Dustin to run it at a starting wage of $22.00 an hour. He did that for

twelve years, and when his boss retired, Dustin was offered the position in charge of all imaging technology. He admits that the learning curve was steep, and there is a lot on his plate: "And this being a small hospital, you really do seems like five people's jobs, but that's the way it has to be. We're not big enough to have, you know, a large number of people, so you kind of get morphed…" Overall, Dustin likes the work, and he earns a salary in the low $60,000 range, which he sees as fair for the area.

However, a few high-earning men have turned down opportunities for advancement. They were already making good wages, and they did not want the added stress or responsibility. Don, who maintains wells in the oil and gas industry, has had opportunities to become a foreman that he has passed up. Not only did he not want to extra stress, he figured he would be safer to stay where he was:

> So, I've always believed the closer you are to the well the safer you are in the company. And that's proved to be true because we've got 1 foreman, 12 well tenders left, so…. Plus, at the time, it didn't pay that much but there was a lot more headache, and I'm like, "I don't want the stress. I'm good."

Jeff, the journeyman carpenter, has chosen not to pursue some of the pathways of additional credentials available through the union:

> Um, they did offer, you can go to an estimation class and you can go to superintendent's class. I think now that I've graduated, I would have to pay a certain fee, but they would pay that back if I maintained a B or above. My desire though is not really to be an estimator or a superintendent. I feel like that's a lot of responsibility. And you see people who do it and it's not, it's not really their responsibility. It's not really worth the stress in my mind, um 'cause your crew, your guys can be what makes or breaks you.

Just 25 years old, Jeff will have opportunity to consider such paths in the future; he knows that he can't do his present work forever:

> Do you want to make, basically—these jobs that I just mentioned, superintendent or whoever uh or the estimator, is to make it easier on you later in life. Do you

> want to be swinging a hammer when you're fifty-five, you know? I have till sixty-seven before I can retire without a penalty. It's ridiculous. I mean, you want, can you see a sixty-year old guy carrying sheets of drywall around?

Men with Bad(ish) Jobs

Up to this point in the chapter, I have examined the men in the study with good jobs. While about one-third of the men in the study currently have a job that pays at least $15 an hour, that means that two-thirds of the men currently make less. This section of the chapter focuses on the employment dynamics of the lower-wage labor market occupied by a majority of the men in this study. As seen in Figure 1, most men in the study who work in the formal labor market make less than $15 an hour, and of that group, most make between $10-15 an hour. Should these be considered bad jobs? In their study of extreme poverty, Edin and Shaefer (2015) find that many of their respondents aspire to jobs that pay about $12 an hour with regular schedules, which is the current situation of many working men in this study. But what are the experiences of the many men in this study with such jobs? In some cases, jobs in this wage range are stepping stones to good jobs. However, most of the men have what I call bad(ish) jobs because they have little reason to think they will eventually ascend to the ranks of good jobs. In particular, I identify four dynamics of these bad(ish) jobs: the job carousel, chutes and ladders, the steel ceiling, and not management material. These dynamics are not mutually exclusive, but they describe distinct aspects of men's labor market experiences. Before exploring these four dynamics in detail, I first examine men who are not in good jobs for reasons of disability, unemployment, or not being in the labor force.

A portion of the lower-earning men in this study receive disability benefits, which are generally less than $1,000 per month. Of those on disability, William, 39, brings in the most at around $1,800 per month, but that includes other benefits he earned from previous employment. As he describes, "… I get a retirement from the VA 'cause I'm considered non-employable. So, I get a retirement check from them. I get a retirement from Social Security. And I get a retirement check from Federal Technician." As discussed in Chapter 2, the receipt of disability benefits is not synonymous with nonwork, as a majority of the men with such benefits currently work on the side or have worked in the past while on disability. However, in no case is that side work enough to raise men close to the "good jobs" threshold. For most men, the side work is more about stability and community, not the meager income it generates. Yet several men who now receive disability used to have good jobs. William parlayed part-time work for the National Guard into fulltime federal work paid on the GS scale; at his peak, he was making $27.90 an hour as a GS-9. However, his unit was deployed, and the resulting tour in Iraq exposed him to the trauma that ultimately led him to qualify for disability. Brad made good money on a traveling crew installing rubber roofs on commercial buildings, but it was that same job that precipitated the back problems that eventually led him onto the disability rolls and into an opioid addiction. Jared was a long-haul truck driver who says he made sixty or seventy thousand a year before a series of health problems took him off the road and eventually onto disability.

Another group of men who make less than $15 an hour currently reports zero income, although as with those on disability, several have previously had jobs that paid at least $15 an hour. Some of the men with no current income are unemployed but looking

for work. In Victor's case, he was unemployed at the time of the interview but had had several good-paying jobs in the past and had accepted a sales job that he said would pay him in the $40,000s with opportunities for performance bonuses. Christian, who once earned double the good jobs threshold but has had trouble finding secure work in recent years, is unemployed and waiting to hear on an electrician job. Steve has made as much as $19 an hour working in the oil and gas industry, but at the time of the interview, he had been unemployed for a few months after being fired from a low-wage job at a lumber company. He believes he was unjustly let go, and he worries that has hurt his search for work: "Yep, on the application it says can we contact your most recent employer. If you mark no, it makes you look bad. So, you got to mark yes." Several of the men with no current income are marginal men, a group discussed in Chapter 2. While a couple of the marginal men are looking for work or working under-the-table, most of the marginal men with no income are not actively seeking work. From here, I now turn to the four dynamics of the lower-wage labor market that emerge across the cases of working men.

The Job Carousel

Like stepping on and off a carousel, the job carousel describes the experience of many men moving among jobs that are relatively fungible with few ladders of advancement and relatively little long-term job security. Common among men making lower wages, there is an identifiable pattern of men making lateral moves among comparable jobs, often at different companies, but always for low wages. Ryan has never made more than $9 an hour across a series of jobs in different industries. In his first job, he made minimum wage at a manufacturing facility but left after just three months:

> There was a lot, they'd hire somebody, everybody's on drugs, bringing alcohol to work in Pepsi bottles and such. I didn't like the way we were treated. You know, you got, you gotta deal with stuff every job you have. There's always something you're not gonna like about it. But it's just a matter of how everybody was treated there, how everybody treated you. The management.

Ryan moved on to a manual labor job where he worked for three years but never made more than $8 an hour. He also had issues with the treatment there:

> I didn't like that place. Because they didn't—I liked it for what I was doing, but they didn't give us time and a half. It got to the point where they would make us go on, they wouldn't let us leave. Like if there was an ice cream place up the road, we weren't allowed to just take off on our lunch break. Well, then he, I don't know what happen, he started getting mad. We're sitting there eating lunch one day, he's like, "[No], what are you doing? Why can't you work?" Work and eat? We got to the point where we, if we wanted to eat, we were working while we were eating, you know? I mean, just dumb stuff, you know? So, we all kinda got fed up and went our own way… Making up stupid rules? Yeah, you gotta swing a shovel while you're eating a-a sub? I don't think so. Break time, lunch break is to relax and eat. You know, stuff like that.

Ryan tried telemarketing for $9 an hour, but he was fired after six months for swearing on a call. He acknowledges that he isn't suited for such work and would rather be outside or doing manual labor. He has also worked in maintenance at a motel for minimum wage and for $9 an hour treating utility poles. For the last year, he has worked part-time as a stock clerk for a grocery store chain. While he likes the physical nature of the work, he is frustrated at not being able to work more hours or qualify for benefits:

> No, no cuz then they'd have to give us benefits, and they don't wanna give us full time and benefits. So… I'm getting a little more hours cuz a lot of people are quitting, but now they're hiring on a lot more people. Three twenty a paycheck, so yeah, I'm making six-forty, six-fifty a month.

Due in part to the fact he has only been able to find low-wage jobs, Ryan has had two stints of about a year each outside the formal labor force. As he said explicitly, he can make more under-the-table, which erodes the incentive to stay in the formal labor force: "I can make just as much working with my brother [a contractor]. Like two days a week,

‘Okay, here’s two hundred bucks, man.’ The end of the month, I’m still making more [under the table].”

This was also the case with Jeremy, whose case was profiled in detail in Chapter 2. Although he made $14 an hour shortly after high school (before leaving over his contention that his boss ignored safety concerns) and currently makes over $13 an hour, he had a period in his twenties where he worked a series of entry-level manual jobs that all paid about $8 an hour. It was during that time, when he was single and living at home, where he took two extended periods off from formal work, instead choosing to work off-the-books: “‘Cause I was doing all these part-time jobs and odd jobs and things like that, and that was bringing in almost the same amount of money and only working maybe fifty percent of the time.” There are labor force participation implications of the job carousel, as men stuck on the carousel feel that they can move in and out of the labor market without the perception of much wage or career penalty. There will always be a low-wage job waiting when they want it, and these men can often make as much money off-the-books as they can from these low-wage positions in the formal labor market.

Charles and Evan are two other men who have worked numerous jobs but never for more than about $10 an hour. Charles, who holds a bachelor’s degree, has had long stretches of unemployment where he has worked under-the-table construction. His highest-paying formal job was in telemarketing, which he worked for four and half years but still made just $10.28 an hour. While Charles said of the job that “you do what you gotta do,” he “hated the job” for several reasons, including the fifty-mile commute each way. He also did not like the work itself: “Stuck in a cubicle. Um... very low freedom at the job. Felt like a dog gnawing at... gnawing at a cage that also had a... was also on a

rope, too." In his current job, he makes $9 an hour at a manufacturing facility. Evan, like Ryan and Charles, has worked in various industries. He worked in manufacturing, sales, natural resources, and the service sector. He has never made more than $9.10 an hour. He currently works as a cashier and stock clerk at a convenience store for minimum wage; he has been there for two years.

Finally, Scott, who has worked in fast food most of his life, also has found himself stepping on and off the job carousel. Although just 30 years old, Scott has worked for McDonald's, Tim Horton's, Arby's, and Taco Bell, in addition to stints working for a factory and a gas station. Scott, who joined the U.S. Army Reserves, also did a tour in Iraq. Several of Scott's fast food jobs have last for two years or more, but his employment has always ended involuntarily. After three and a half years at McDonald's, Scott says he was fired for a scheduling misunderstanding, and he was let go from Tim Horton's for accidentally leaving the back door open, a violation of security protocol. He wanted to stay at Arby's but was not getting enough hours. Having never made more than $11 an hour, Scott currently makes $10.50 as a shift leader at Taco Bell. Because Scott does not want a shop job, he thinks he is "stuck" working in fast food: "Um, it's mostly... it's just another one of those starter jobs for kids, pretty much, or for people like me, that kind of get stuck in the, I don't want to work in a shop job. So, I'm kind of stuck working somewhere fast food-ish."

Chutes and Ladders

Ivoking the title of Newman's (2006) book about the low-wage labor market, chutes and ladders describes the fact that many men make at least modest advancements

in wages, only to find themselves pushed back down the wage ladder. Similar to Newman's "'up but not out' club", these men have not yet managed to grab the rung of a ladder of predictable advancement. This is not an isolated phenomenon. It goes without saying that the men in the study who are currently unemployed, not in the labor force, or on disability are earning less than they once did. However, even among the men currently working, nearly 40 percent have at one time in the past earned more than they make today, indicating that experiencing a step backward in pay at some point during one's employment history is almost the rule, not the exception. While there might be strategic reasons for taking a temporary step back in pay, such as when making a career change, most examples of step backs in pay among the men in this study are involuntary. This picture stands in contrast with that of predictable and secure advancement described earlier in the chapter when discussing those with good jobs, especially men who are union members.

As already mentioned, a number of men who are currently unemployed or on disability once had good jobs. But there are also several men in the study who once had good jobs that paid over $15 an hour but no longer do. Kyle started at $8 an hour in the shipping and receiving department at a manufacturer. After a year and a half, he bid out to work in customer service, where he worked for another three years. He had worked up to $15.50 an hour and says he was essentially the head of his small department. However, a change in management changed his situation. Kyle lost the boss he liked, and the new boss brought in someone from outside to be Kyle's immediate supervisor, essentially taking over the responsibilities Kyle once had. When they asked Kyle to train his new boss, he quit: "And then they asked me to train him, which at the time I declined, put my

two weeks in. So, that was sort of me leaving there." Before he quit, Kyle worked out an arrangement to work at a locally-owned grocery store. While he now makes $10 an hour, he can walk to work, which is especially nice in the snowy winters. It is unclear if or when Kyle will work back up to $15.50.

Like Kyle, Paul had worked his way up to a good wage, in his case making $16.40 an hour for one of the local municipalities. In this case, it was Paul's oversight that led to the loss of his good job: he failed to renew his driver's license, which he needed for his job. Paul explained he had a lot on his mind:

> Um... I, at the end of that, towards the end of the twelve years, um, in there, my dad had passed away. Um, lot of things going through my head. I wasn't taking care of a few things that I needed to take care of. One of those was my driver's license renewal. Completely forgot about it. That lead to um...a termination…

Paul knew he had let his family down, so he immediately did all he could to make amends:

> So, I started applying for jobs everywhere: McDonald's, Burger King, Walmart, you name it, gas stations, I was applying. Um, I knew it was gonna be a hurt in family. I was even talkin' to people about workin' in the oil fields. Um, and I knew how much time I would be away from my family if I did it.

The first job he managed was at a juvenile detention center an hour's drive away, but the burden of the drive plus the cost in gas was too much. Through a contact of his wife's, Paul managed to get hired at a drug and alcohol treatment facility, where he has been for six years. He makes $13.40 an hour and likes the work, but his oversight years ago has proven costly.

For Mark and Doug, changes of geography also mean reductions in pay. Mark was born and raised in northwestern Pennsylvania, but a job took him to New York, and then a relationship brought him to central Pennsylvania, where he got a job in a factory.

He started at $15 an hour and worked up to $23, but both his marriage and the job ended. Without work or his marriage, he moved back to northwestern Pennsylvania and drew unemployment while he planned his next move. He decided to move back to New York, but before he could go, he met a local woman and stayed. He got work at a local factory, where he has worked for three years: “I started out at ten, ten dollars an hour and went to ten-fifty, and now I’m at ten-ninety-five.” He plans to stay and likes the job well enough: “Just you stay busy and time goes fast.” Doug also worked a couple different jobs in northwestern Pennsylvania, but he and his girlfriend decided to try their luck out West in Las Vegas. Doug, who had worked in a restaurant locally, got a job at a café and started interviewing for better work: “When we first moved there, I went around and did all these job interviews and I have to cook for people. It was really nerve wracking.” He eventually got a job at a restaurant in the culinary union: “Like their benefits are like unbelievable. And uh, they have like a retirement plan, like they got like all that stuff. Um, they’ll even like put a down payment on a house for you.” Doug made about $20 an hour and took full advantage of the benefits: “I hadn’t been to a doctor in like 10 years. So, I’m like going to the dentist, going to the doctor, getting contacts, like it was awesome.” Doug and his girlfriend eventually returned to northwestern Pennsylvania, but although Doug had big-city experience, it did not translate into a similar wage. The chef at a local restaurant, Doug makes a salary of around $29,000.

Finally, Derek is one example of a man who has a good job today but still makes less now than he once did. Derek started out on the job carousel, working a series of machining jobs for years at a time that all paid $9 or $10 an hour, even though he thinks his labor was worth more, especially considering the value he was creating for the

company. As he explained, “You know, a lot of them bearings were about this big, as big as this hot plate thing right here, and that would be sixty thousand dollars, and they’re paying us like nine bucks an hour to, you know, make this stuff.” When he was laid off, he took the first available work in the logging industry. He liked the work, but when he got married and started a family, he decided he needed a job with health insurance:

> Yeah, after I did it [logging], after I went and tried it for a couple of weeks, I said, “Yeah, I’ll do this, this thing sounds fun.” So, me and [his boss] did that for a while, and then, there’s no health insurance, nobody has health insurance, nothing like that working in the woods. I mean, it’s just unheard of. Because everyone’s like a subcontractor is the way you get hired. And, uh, we got married during that time. Decided to have a kid and I thought we better get some health insurance if we’re going to do this. So that’s when I went to work in the oil and gas.

Like with his other jobs, Derek liked the work. While he did have health insurance working in the oil and gas industry, he did not have retirement: “that’s part of it too, in that industry, you know.” He worked his way up to a good wage, but then the economy around oil and gas collapsed:

> It was, I was making eighteen bucks an hour. So, it was decent money for this area, you know. Um... and then when the prices everything crashed down, he said, “Hey, I can’t, I can’t do your health insurance no more.” Then vacation time went away. It was just taking and taking and taking. And finally, I said, I gotta do something different.

Derek left on good terms but had to find other work. The first thing he found was driving for an industrial facility making $16.75 an hour. It is still a good job and hopefully secure, but it is less than his last position.

Steel Ceiling

While northwestern Pennsylvania is known as the birthplace of the oil industry, western Pennsylvania is also built upon steel. Borrowing the reference to steel from the

area's past, I identify what I call the steel ceiling, which refers to the fact that many men in this study seem to max out their hourly earnings in the $10-15 an hour range. While naming $15 an hour as the threshold of a "good job" is arbitrary, Figure 1 shows that $15 an hour represents a wage ceiling for many of the working men. While almost half of the men currently make between $10 and $15 an hour, only four make between $15 and $20 an hour. This could be a function of the sample itself, but as the labor force narratives of these men reveal, many have been working in positions for years, only to see their wages stagnate at a level between $10 and $15 an hour.

After seven years working in a warehouse, Dan still made just $8.50, so as described in Chapter 3, he took a voluntary layoff, earned his Commercial Driver's License (CDL), and starting long-haul truck driving. This work paid better, but Dan did not like the long stretches away from home, so he left driving for to work as a mechanic while he looked for other work. Dan was hired as a general laborer in a steel plant, where he has encountered the steel wage ceiling: after ten and a half years, he makes $13.75 an hour. Dan gets full benefits and has gotten raises over the years, but the chances to move up are rare: "Well, it's [the wage] moved up a lot. We got a quarter raise, but I mean, to get a different, uh, a position, higher position as you work your way up the ladder. Somebody's either gotta quit or retire. You're pretty much stuck where you're at."

Nick has been operating heavy equipment for the same company for eight and a half years; he started at $12 an hour and now earns $14.65 an hour. He gets benefits, including paid vacation, but not paid holidays. He earns time-and-a-half for anything over forty hours, which boosts his earnings, but he also spoke at length of ways his boss breaks rules when it comes to the schedule: "So, if you at all drive anytime during that

week, you're limited to twelve hours a day, sixty hour week. But my boss doesn't work in those terms. He thinks we're somehow above the law…" Nick describes exceeding those hourly limits, including once working a twenty-three-hour day. He also talked at some length about cases where he thinks his boss shorted him on pay. Nick says of his boss, "Anything he can get away with, he'll surely do it." Even if he has concerns about his current situation, Nick knows he won't make more at other local outfits. He even suspects collusion on wage among local employers:

> So, see the thing is, this area keeps it that way. You know, I can't go... like I said, it's not competitive to even go to [a competitor] because they're around the same area [in pay]. It's almost like they congregate and say, "Don't pay them more because you know we've got 'em."

Zach, who works in the creative industries, also has seen his wages plateau just short of good jobs territory. He works for a small business that is dependent on project-based work. As a young man, the first challenge was finding anything where he could use his artistic talents: "… there really wasn't anything to do around here. I mean, I really didn't know about any artistic jobs in the area." When he learned of a local screen-printing shop, he applied but didn't hear anything for over a year. When the shop had a surge of business, they called offered Zach a job. He thinks he started at around minimum wage, and eleven years later, he makes around $14 an hour. He says his pay increases have been informal: "I mean, we really never sat down and negotiated anything, and she's just periodically bumped me up and pay and I've never had to ask for anything." Zach seems content with his pay, although he's recently taken on part-time work on the side to buffer against times when business at the shop is slow. As a small business, there are limited opportunities for Zach to move up, and he is not interested in management:

> I'm pretty much at, I mean, I'm the art department so it's pretty much, unless I take over the business someday, that would be the next step, but I don't really have an interest in taking on that headache, because I've seen with the owner has to deal with on a daily basis, and she was the art department, and now she doesn't hardly do any of that now, so.

Alex, who was profiled in Chapter 3, has worked as a direct care aid at a nursing home for six years but has only seen his wage move from $7.25 to $8.25 an hour. He believes that workers in his same job make more at other local facilities, but he is attached to his residents and is hesitant to leave. And he is reluctant to move into a higher role because he likes his daily contact with the residents. George found his current job as a machinist through a temp agency. He thought the temporary period was only supposed to last for 90 days, but he was kept on as a temp for six months, he thinks to avoid the additional costs of hiring him fulltime. However, he was eventually hired. George made $7.50 as a temp, which was raised to $9 an hour when he was hired. In the five years he has worked there, his wage has moved to $12.50 an hour, although he thought it was supposed to go to $13 last year. Curtis, who was out of the labor force for his early adult life due to drug abuse, has now been stably employed for a manufacturer for seven years. Also originally hired through a temp agency, Curtis has moved up from minimum wage to $13.50 an hour. He has been happy with the company, and he has even been successful when asking for raises:

> I got a few raises because I actually went in and asked them, which was kinda cool. They [are] a really good company. Really, really good to me when there are a couple of times, and I was like listening to them, trained on like, everything. Can I have a raise? And they're like, "Yeah."

Content for now, time will tell if Curtis will continue to advance or if he is nearing a wage ceiling that will be difficult to break through.

Not Management Material

A final characteristic of the job experiences of men in bad(ish) jobs is the fact that some of the men have been passed over for promotion, thus closing off one of the paths to good jobs profiled earlier in the chapter and perhaps partially explaining the steel wage ceiling.[57] When Kyle took offense and quit over having new management bring in someone above him, he lost a job that paid over $15 an hour in the process. George, mentioned earlier, makes $12.50 after five years as a machinist. But before his current job, he spent many years trying to make a career in the service sector. His first and best chance came with a grocery store chain, where he worked for six years. He never made more than $8 an hour,[58] and eventually he realized that he had probably maximized his earning potential:

> But anyways, I think what I was trying to say was, I mean, it hit a point where I think I realized I'd gone as far as I was going to go within [the company]. I was not somebody they viewed as management material, and I think I'd hit the glass ceiling as far as somebody who was going to go without getting into management. And I think that's when I hit a point—I decided to leave [the company].

In the several years that followed, George rode the job carousel among several similarly paid, entry-level service jobs, never making much more than minimum wage.

Gary, 46, has been passed not once but twice for promotion in different industries. After working for McDonald's for a few years right out of high school, he took a job piling lumber, one of the most common entry-level positions among the men in this

57 While I have the perspective of a few employers from an early phase of this project, I cannot speak from the employers' perspectives about whether it was justifiable for them to pass over these men for promotion in these cases. The point here is descriptive: because some men are deemed "not management material" by their employers, they lose one of the few possible pathways to higher wages.
58 George left this position in 2003 when minimum wage in Pennsylvania was $5.15 an hour.

study. While most men do not last long in that role, Gary says he did that "for many years." But he wanted to move up, and eventually he performed other roles within the company, including operating the stacker and driving high lift. The real promotion opportunity to lumber grader—"looking at the knots, you know, how far they are apart, and different degrees, and how much you can get out of this piece and that piece"—but Gary claims the teacher started dating one of the students, "so he forgot about everybody else." The woman the teacher was dating was promoted. Over the course of ten years with the company, Gary's pay only went from $8 to $12 an hour. When they moved him to third shift, he decided to look elsewhere. His next job was working second shift for the school district in custodial maintenance. A union job with good benefits, his work at the school offered insurance for his family and a 401k match. The pay was not markedly different, but he did work up to $13 an hour. However, as with the lumber company, Gary was frustrated at being passed over for promotion. He tried multiple times to bid on first shift jobs ("I wanted to see my kids"), but he was never successful. As he said, "I was tired of getting passed over for day jobs." Despite the benefits and pay, he eventually moved on. In the three jobs Gary has had since leaving the school, he has made between $11 and $13.50 an hour, similar wages but with less generous benefits. In fact, he is now trying to get back into the school district, but he has had no luck thus far. Gary would like to complete training as an LPN and move into healthcare, but he cannot afford to leave work.

The Downwardly Mobile

A few of the working men in this study comprise their own distinct group, namely those who have chosen to make less than they otherwise might in favor of other priorities. These men—by virtue of their lower hourly wages—are technically among those in the study with bad(ish) jobs, but by virtue of their education or family background, they are shielded from some of the dynamics of the lower-wage labor market. These men are also distinct from the marginal men, another group that includes some who have chosen to deprioritize work. While some marginal men have left formal work because they have other priorities, the downwardly mobile have strong labor force attachment and have more labor market capital than the marginal men. Justin, for example, used his GI Bill to earn his degree in elementary education. He graduated in the Spring and spent the summer applying for jobs without success. When the new school year began, he substitute taught and later took what he thought was a job at a charter school that he said turned out to be more like a "glorified daycare." He worked that job for the rest of the school year, but a year after earning his degree, he had yet to get even an interview for a teaching position. He got a tip about a private Christian school in the area that was hiring, so he applied and was hired just a few weeks before the beginning of the next school year. Justin has now taught at the school for five years, where he makes much less than he would at a public school: "I make about half as much as a public school teacher would, so I'm making in the low 20 thousands." Although he could be making more, he justifies his choice in two ways: "… I don't have to deal with the bureaucratic stuff, which is really important to me also. And um, I'm obsessively religious, so that works

also, so."[59] Justin's wife works fulltime at about $9 an hour, and between the two of them, they do well enough to get by. However, if push ever came to shove, he has a credential—his teaching certification—worth more in the labor market if needed. But as he explains in detail using his dry wit, his situation is stable:

> Justin: … I'd say we're comfortably in the lower-middle class so. Um... we live a little bit below our means to cushion things. We have a 17-year-old car that's still running and a 7-year-old car, so yeah. Ah, but both were bought new, that's just part of my wife's personality, so you know? But we live a little below our means, so we do have a savings account, but neither of us really have a retirement plan. I think my wife's retirement plan is me dying at work.
>
> Interviewer: [Laughs] I don't laugh because I want something bad to happen to you.
>
> Justin: This is true, yeah. This is true, you know so.... um, money really isn't a big concern, though. I don't care much about it because it's not really worth anything anyway. I've had money before in short periods before I was married, you know, I didn't really had any bills and I could buy anything I wanted and you know, my wife was in a very similar boat and we're pretty on... we're not really materialistic people so um, being broke works out really well for not materialistic. Um, when we do have extra money, like we ever have, but if we do have extra money, we usually just end up giving it away anyway or giving to something, not giving it away but we give to things through the church usually.

Like Justin, Jordan has a bachelor's degree but is currently choosing not to maximize his earning potential in order to prioritize other pursuits. Jordan, who comes from a working-class household, is one of only two men in the study to pursue and complete a bachelor's degree immediately after high school. He attended a local college, living on campus his first two years and commuting from home his final two years. In contrast to the vocational and technical orientation of most men in the study (see Chapter

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59 In the context of the interview, "obsessively religious" is not synonymous with fundamentalist. Justin, who identifies as a pacifist, is an elder in his Mennonite church and has pursued some post-secondary theological education online.

3), Jordan chose to study English literature, which he says he found interesting. However, Jordan's vocational drive is toward pastoral ministry. He is a volunteer with his local church and is pursuing additional education and training online. He has chosen to stay close-to-home for the time being because he is invested in the work of his local church. While Jordan's vocational focus is church, he supports himself by working for his father, who is a self-employed logger. Jordan explains:

> So, I'm going into Pastoral Ministry. Uh, that's my, my long term, and actually, my short-term plan. I'm doing it now. Just to, just can't fund myself doing it right now, um, so I'm funding myself in the woods. Um, but I went, um, I want, wanted, that's my life and making other people's lives a little better. Um, and, so that's the plan.

Jordan is a subcontractor and makes only about $1,000 a month, which puts him far below the "good jobs" threshold, but he has minimal expenses and only works as much as he needs to live so he can put most of his time into church work. Time will tell what Jordan does in the future, but it is clear he has chosen to be downwardly mobile for the time being.

Finally, Randy is another example of someone whose current hourly wage is not reflective of his labor market position. Randy's grandfather opened a small electrician's business in the 1950s that has passed from Randy's father and now to him. Randy never really considered other work:

> I mean, that was always like a thing. I was never pressured into it or anything. But, you know, when I was little and tagging around with dad in the summers and whatnot, it was just neat. And I was just good at it. And I have a good mechanical skill set. So, you know, it just fit. And I don't know, I like the—I like the ability to be out and about, you know, and the days that are super nice, you can be outside instead of, you know, at an office looking out. I don't like computers, so it just fit.

After high school, his parents wanted him to get some training before starting work, so Randy earned an associate degree and did a couple other short-term trainings.

Once he had his education, he came back and started working for the business. Randy started at minimum wage but eventually grew discontent with his pay, thinking he couldn't get established on such a low wage. Around this time, another business tried to recruit him, so with a competing offer in hand, Randy issued an ultimatum: he gets a raise to $10 an hour or he'd take the other offer. Randy got the raise and stayed with the family business. Just over a year ago, control of the business transferred to Randy ("You know, it was like a buyer-for-a-buck sort of thing"), but he remains an hourly employee. Despite owning the company, Randy makes an hourly rate of just $11.25. He thinks the fringe benefits make his actual rate higher, but he also knows there's a ceiling to what he can make in the area:

> But, yes, but it's like I'm driving a 2014 truck that the company pays for, my cell phone's paid for by the company. You know, I mean, I have—there's other things that make up for that. So yeah, if you tally everything together, like fringe benefits, it's like I'm over 20, which is pretty decent. But I mean, I'm in a small town and I can't charge $100 an hour and I like what I do. So that makes it all the better too.

While making a high hourly wage is important to many of these men, Justin, Jordan, and Randy demonstrate that not everything can be judged by the hourly rate alone, a topic I tackle more fully in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, despite a pessimism among many about male employment in rural places, many men in this study make at least $15 an hour—and some make much more. These men work in a range of jobs and occupations and attained their positions in a variety of ways, although common threads among those with good

jobs include working in blue-collar occupations, belonging to a union, and having a managerial position. Yet while many men are doing well, the majority of men in this study do not make $15 an hour—and some make much less. Some men are currently unemployed, not in the labor force, or living on meager disability benefits. For these men, the challenge is one of frugality and subsistence. As Jared, who receives disability benefits, says, “I don’t have no extras or nothing and stuff like that.” But most of the working men in this study are not stuck at $8 an hour, but $11 or $12 or $13. These wages are much higher than the minimum, but they only approximate what the minimum wage would be if it had kept up with inflation (Desilver 2017; Tarr 2015). The men with these jobs also face labor market challenges, including what feels to them like an inability to advance.

Given the way that many of these men are stuck at wages below $15 an hour, one might suspect that many of these men would support the push for a higher minimum wage. Charles, who has never made more than $10.28 an hour, supported Bernie Sanders in 2016 and spoke at length about why he thinks there should be a $15-an-hour minimum wage:

> I supported Bernie Sanders in the, ah, in the elec... ah, presidential campaign. I believe one change that would definitely help people in this area would be a fifteen dollar an hour minimum wage. I think it’s, ah, ridiculous that, ah, the minimum wage has stayed stagnant for so long at 7.5. You know, I believe that minimum wage workers that... minimum wage if we are, you know, we have decided as a society that we are going to have a minimum wage, we should at least it with the cost of inflation. You should at least be able to, you know, have the same buying power every year, you know? Minimum wage workers have, basically, every year it doesn't go up, it’s a pay cut for them, you know, in real dollars, you know. You know, everything else is going up, cost of housing, cost of food, you know, that’s, you know, that definitely one thing I would... I would change. Um... You know, I... I also think, you know, fifteen dollars an hour minimum wage could be good for the economy of [this] County or in... in this area. You know, with so many jobs many jobs paying far below that it would

> actually bring more money... more money in. Ah, lot of, ah, I... You know, a lot of employers who are here, are here because they can pay sub-par... sub-par wages, let's be frank about it, and I think that's part of the reason why the wages and the opportunity is just so low, because the employers have every incentive to keep it... keep the status quo.

Others, however, are not so sure. Nick, who has his CDL and makes $14.65 after eight and a half year with the same employer, is less sure what would happen to the local economy if the minimum wage was raised that high. He also wonders what it means for him, as someone with a credential and skills, if fast food workers suddenly make more than he does after years on the job:

> Then you look at any of the national news where somebody's waving signs that they want minimum wage to be fifteen bucks an hour. That just tells me that I don't no longer have to have a skill of driving a truck or doing anything that I do now because if they want that and they get it, that's all I'd have to do to get a raise. I would be then making more than I make now for kind of a trade or a special skill.

Asking explicitly about the minimum wage was not part of the interview protocol, but men were given the opportunity to speak about their work, the local economy, and at times, national politics. In response to those questions, men raised any number of personal, political and policy issues, but wages were rarely one of them. While many men made offhand comments during the interviews about wanting to make more money and some men had taken concrete steps to improve their wages, most men in the study displayed relatively high degree of contentment with their jobs and lives. It is this topic to which I turn in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5: BACKROADS BOYS: MASCULINITY, IDENTITY, AND VOCATIONAL SELFHOOD AMONG RURAL, WORKING-CLASS MEN

Wearing a baseball cap and a worn, lime green golfing shirt, Nick and I sat in the corner of a restaurant in northwestern Pennsylvania on a mid-July evening talking about his life. Nick, 38, told me that he once had an interest in law enforcement, but because he knew his parents couldn't afford school, he "never asked, and I never insinuated that that was something that I wanted to do." After high school, he worked at a local photography studio, but the business failed to adjust to the advent of digital cameras and went under. Nick transitioned to work as a machinist for a local manufacturer, working there for four years making around $8.00 an hour. But when the company was acquired and business slowed—"It was, kind of, you know, an economy thing"—they started asking workers to work every other week and draw unemployment insurance on the off times: "I'd get a regular paycheck from working. I'd collect an unemployment check. It's every other week like that for awhile." With a newborn at home, Nick decided to get his commercial driver's license and start long-haul truck driving. While he liked the open road and it paid well, he felt that big employers had no regard for him personally, such as when he wanted to be home on weekends when he had custody of his daughter. He also found he got "a little homesick", so he eventually transitioned to driving locally. After eight and a half years with the same employer, Nick now makes $14.65 an hour, more than double the state minimum but still a wage that amounts to little more than $30,000 a year. He gets benefits and two weeks of paid vacation—three once he gets to ten years with the company—but does not get paid holidays. He describes his boss operating as though he is

"above the law", which sometimes puts workers in harm's way, but Nick knows the other local employers and says there's no place where he'd make more. Nick is largely happy:

> You're really flirting with a disaster a lot with this occupation. Um, I guess all in all, I'm still happy at work. I get to see my daughter. Making ends meet. I don't have a lot of extra... I get to golf today. You know, that's my free time. Had a week's vacation that I took about a month ago now, and that's all I did. Two or three days I golfed. That was my vacation. Good enough. I don't need a thousand dollars to go to a casino or trip to stay in a cabin somewhere.

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What is the state of the working class in rural America today? As Edin et al. (2019) argue, the bargain many working-class men stuck in the twentieth century has broken down in the twenty-first.[60] For many men profiled in earlier treatments of the working class (Halle 1984; Kohn 1969; Komarovsky 1964; Lamont 2000), they accepted work that was often tedious and even dangerous in exchange for a wage that allowed a middle-class level of consumption and enabled a form of family life—the male breadwinner model—that preserved their status as head of the household. Almost two decades into the new century, that bargain has broken down for many men, who now have work that is neither remunerative nor fulfilling. As I discussed in other chapters, some men have managed to do well in the new economy (Chapter 4), but most men experience some churning in and out of the labor force (Chapter 2), many men are stuck in jobs where ladders of advancement are blocked or nonexistent (Chapter 4), and a few men have even detached from the labor force completely (Chapter 2).

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60 It is important to note that this largely applies to white men. There is ample evidence that working-class men of color were often excluded from the best-paying working class jobs through mechanisms both formal and informal (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014; Royster 2003; Trimble and Kmec 2011; Wilson 1987)

In the face of this rupture of the social contract with working-class men, what has happened to working-class male identity? In this chapter, I examine how men understand their identities in this new world of working-class work. First, I explore how the nature of these men's jobs shapes their ability to think about and plan for the future. For the minority of men in secure positions, particularly those with jobs that offer a clear retirement timeline, they think of the future in those terms. Moreover, some men even forego opportunities for promotion at work in favor of maintaining job security, a demonstration that job security, which is elusive, is more prized than prestige or even income. But for those who do not have secure work, which is a majority of the men, they have difficulty thinking and planning for the future, which reflects the insecure nature of their work. In this sense, thinking about the future is a luxury these men are not afforded.

How then does this job insecurity affect the relationship of work and identity? First, I find that men ask both *more* and *less* of work than working-class men profiled in other sociological literature. They ask *more* in the sense that men care about the nature of their work and are less willing to countenance work that is not personally fulfilling or at least tolerable, especially when it does not pay well enough to justify the conditions. But men also ask *less* of work in the sense that many men have deemphasized the role of work in their identities. Men still value work, but they also find meaning in other spheres like family, church, friendship, and hobbies. Rather than identity being centered around "the disciplined self" (Lamont 2000), I find that men have what I call *vocational selves*, in which they find meaning and fulfillment in non-work pursuits.[61] Calling this a

61 As will be discussed later in this chapter, I also find that men speak of their emotional and relational selves, which fits with recent profiles of the working class (Cherlin 2014; Silva 2013).

vocational self seems counterintuitive, but I am resurrecting a historical meaning of vocation in which one's calling is multivalent and not necessarily tied to one's livelihood.[62] In the face of often meaningless and poorly paid work, men have elevated other aspects of their lives as sources of meaning and satisfaction. Some men express their vocational selves in hobbies that seem diversionary, while others invest in vocations that are generative (Edin et al. 2019), although the line between these is often blurred.[63] Asking both more and less of work are two sides of the same coin: they both imply less commitment and attachment to one's job.

There is a second way in which men in this study diverge from previous treatments of the working class. In contrast to working-class men who are rootless (Cherlin 2014) and even angry (Silva 2013), the men in this study display a high degree of contentment with their situations, which I attribute to a set of subcultural beliefs and practices grounded in rural masculinity. This identity is deeply connected to rural place and rooted in working with one's hands, being outdoors for work and leisure, and having autonomy. Rather than "stuck" in rural America (Florida 2019), the men in this study strongly identify with what they see as the virtues of rural life, challenges and all, which provides refuge from the vicissitudes of labor market precarity. Yet while these beliefs provide a sense of contentment, but they also constrain how men approach work. For

62 I am influenced by the Lutheran understanding of vocation, in which vocation "refers not only to one's occupation but to all one's relationships, situations, contexts, and involvements (including, of course, one's occupation, if one is employed)" (Kolden 2001). A vocation, in the sense I am using the term here, refers to an activity that gives meaning and satisfaction, and contributes to one's sense of self.

63 There will be more examples later in the chapter, but one example of how a vocation can simultaneously be diversionary and generative is Steve's love of dirt-track racing. He builds and races cars on dirt tracks throughout northwestern Pennsylvania, which at first glance seems frivolous, even if it is meaningful to him. However, Steve learned this from his now-deceased father, and he has passed it on to his son. As such, it has been a source of familial bonding, and in that sense, it is generative.

example, the aversion to working for a boss in supervised, indoor settings limits opportunities; seeing urban spaces as unsafe makes them non-starters for relocation; and masculinity as expressed in practical, hands-on skill, as discussed in Chapter 3, can evoke a distrust of higher education or even an anti-intellectual ethos. Construed positively, this sense of rural masculinity provides a meaningful connection to place.[64] Further, one unspoken aspect of this rural rootedness is its whiteness, which offers an unspoken and often unexamined sense of social solidarity.

Finally, the negotiation of identity for these men unfolds in the context of families, which have largely been absent in this dissertation to this point. Many men delay children and marriage, but rather than use this time to solidify their labor market position, they often exist in a state of marginal attachment to the labor force as seen in Chapter 2. The fact that family is often a motivator for men to get serious about work echoes the process found among urban families (Edin and Kefalas 2007). Yet because secure work is elusive for most men, forming families is not a "cure" for labor market precarity. For those in marriages and partnerships, there is most often a household-level livelihood strategy, marking a return to a previous mode of family life that predates the male breadwinner model (Cherlin 2014). While this does not represent a total breakdown of traditional gender roles around tasks like caregiving, there is a sense that the rigidity of certain roles has eroded. And while family complexity is common (Cherlin 2010), many men in this study have traditional family forms of being married with children.

64 A possible counter-factual that is largely invisible to this study is the fact that those men from this area with contrary values—what might be seen as "ambition"—have left the area (see the discussion of "High Flyers" in Carr and Kefalas 2009).

Literature Review

A large body of sociological literature has explored the lives of working-class men. Early treatments focused on blue-collar occupations and told of life on the shop floor and the repetitive and demanding work it entailed (Burawoy 1982; Halle 1984; Komarovsky 1964; Rubin 1976). While these jobs gave men a sense of identity (Lamont 2000; Willis 1981), they also afforded a level of consumption that provided its own reward in jobs that could still be repetitive and even dangerous (Edin et al. 2019). But these jobs were not to last forever. Another wave of literature—mostly in the 1980s and 1990s but continuing to the present—tells of the disappearance of those good-paying, secure factory jobs (Alexander 2017; Chen 2015; Dudley 1994; Goldstein 2018; Linkon and Russo 2002; Milkman 1997). These works profile plant closures and the subsequent impacts on company towns and the workers themselves, mourning the days—still within the lived experience of many workers—when men without a college degree could make a middle-class living. Sociological treatments of work in the twenty-first century have been dominated by themes of precarity and insecurity (Cooper 2014; Kalleberg 2011; Pugh 2015; Silva 2013).

One stream of this working-class literature has focused on the white working class, a group recently raised to prominence by the election of Donald Trump on a wave of white, working-class support (Cohn 2017). This renewed interest in white, working-class people, especially those in rural places, has elevated several existing works and invited a flood of others. *Hillbilly Elegy*, the memoir of "hillbilly"-turned-graduate of Yale Law School J.D. Vance (2016), suggests that while rural America has been hard hit

by broader economic forces, the diagnosis—as the book's subtitle stresses—is of "a family and culture in crisis." Hochschild's (2016) empathetic *Strangers in their Own Land* humanizes her Tea Party subjects, casting them as understandably grieved at losing their "place in line" in favor of women and minorities. While attempts to demystify rural and working-class whites is welcome since these people and places have long been overlooked (Burton et al. 2013), there remains a need—especially in this political moment—to further reexamine the state of white, working-class men.

We know that the economic fortunes of working-class men have dimmed. Greenstone and Looney (2011) summarize several concerning trends: 1) real male earnings today are lower than in the 1970s; 2) among full-time, full-year male workers, all but college-educated men have experienced double-digit *decreases* in inflation-adjusted mean earnings since 1969; and 3) the percentage of men working full-time decreased from 83 percent in 1960 to 66 percent in 2009. The forces of deindustrialization (Weis 1990) and de-unionization (Rosenfeld 2014)—compounded by neoliberal policy responses—have left men without college degrees in a state of precarity (Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody 2006; Standing 2011). Jobs that were previously good working-class jobs, like long-haul trucking (Viscelli 2016), have been degraded. In short, the economy is offering fewer good-paying jobs to men with less than a college degree, and the jobs that exist for these men have not allowed them to keep up.[65] How have men responded to this new world of work?

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65 It should be noted that while white, working-class men can claim some sense of past success and stability, men of color and women have long been excluded—formally and informally—from good-paying, blue-collar work.

Some literature depicts working-class men as victims of a betrayal (Faludi 1999), displaced and "put on the scrap heap" (Kenway and Kraack 2004: 99). This betrayal, at least in the eyes of the men themselves, has left them emasculated, humiliated, and angry (Gest 2016; Kimmel 2017; Sexton 2017). However, other work suggests that working-class men have been more strategic and active in their resistance to these economic changes. Willis' (1981) classic work on lives of working-class boys in England depicts white working-class youth as political actors, consciously resisting authority, even though it meant socially reproducing their working-class station in life. As Aronowitz notes in the Forward to an edited volume reflecting on Willis' original study (Dolby, Dimitriadis, and Willis 2004), Willis' boys are not failures or victims: they consciously reject "the cultural and political implications of buying into the curriculum and accepting school authority" (ix). Similarly, Halle (1984) observes how unionized blue-collar workers expend considerable energy making their jobs more tolerable, what might be a form of micro-resistance. Yet while resistance theory recasts working-class subjects as agents, more recent work (Calarco 2018) questions whether observations of the working-class that predate the college-for-all push are outdated. More to the point, how does a strategy of resistance work in a world of bad jobs (Kalleberg 2011)?

McDowell (2003) followed 24 British men coming of age in the early 2000s, a time when the manufacturing work available to Willis' lads was virtually gone. She still finds among these boys a striving to create meaning, which lends modest support to resistance theory and confounds the notion that young, working-class men are passive victims or idlers. But she also documents ways in which her working-class subjects, by doubling down on "the hegemonic version of masculinity that is misogynistic as well as

deeply ambivalent about race" (2003: 20), marginalize themselves from labor market opportunities in expanding sectors and disqualify themselves as potential mates for women whose own notions of gender roles are changing.

In Australia, a similar exploration (Kenway et al. 2006) finds a sense of destabilization among working-class men. Yet they also find that responses varied between the study's two sites, one a "country city" and the other a coastal town. Men in both localities experienced a rupture of working-class culture, but the men of the country city were more likely to resist efforts to reconceive working-class masculinity in new terms or retool for twenty-first century jobs. This fits with other research that suggests rural masculinity is quintessential (Lobao 2006); rural men hold more traditional attitudes toward gender and masculinity than rural women or nonrural men (Courtenay 2006); and the sense among rural, white, working-class men that they are often viewed by urbanites as backwards, unsophisticated, and "redneck" (Cramer 2016; Sherman 2009).

More recent work among the working class finds not only anger but disconnection and despondency. Silva (2013), who interviewed a multi-racial group of one hundred American men and women with working-class parents, found that as the traditional markers of adulthood moved out of the reach of her respondents, they withdrew from any hope of changing the system and took charge of the one thing they could control, namely their own emotional and psychological selves. Similarly, Cherlin (2014) finds a sense of rootlessness and disengagement among working-class men that is also bathed in the language of therapy and self-help. Sherman (2009), in her mid-2000s ethnography of a small mill town in northern California, found that when jobs, income, and other sources of identity were removed, morality became the basis of social differentiation. Morality

"actively structures social life and the social hierarchy of the community" (Sherman 2009:5). Moral discourses around hard work are the most powerful; the most normative; and the most concrete in the consequences for failure to adhere. Sherman's identification of the power of morality extends Lamont's (2000) work on "the disciplined self" of the working class from a generation earlier, where she found that American workers are preoccupied with "keeping the world in order—in moral order, that is—at the top of their agenda" (19). Other work finds that fatherhood is another important source of meaning for men, especially less-educated men whose employment prospects are dim (Edin and Nelson 2013; Waller 2002).

Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, I explore how the nature of working-class work has affected working-class identity for these men and how men in this study differ from those in other recent work about the working class. One well-documented aspect of working-class work in the twenty-first century is that most jobs no longer offer a defined time horizon for retirement (Kalleberg 2011, 2018), which introduces uncertainty about the future. What does this mean for how men see themselves and their futures? I find that those in this study with less employment security are more likely to have a present-orientation in which they resist efforts to plan for or even think much about the future. In short, thinking about the future is a luxury most men cannot afford. Men have learned, often through personal experience, that employment circumstances can change quickly, so there is little use in planning ahead. But for those men whose jobs offer security, especially when it is connected to a clear timeline for retiring with a pension, the men

speak about the future in those terms. This future-orientation appears even among men whose work does not pay particularly well but who have promise of a pension, suggesting that security is more meaningful than wages.

Another way in which men have adjusted to a world of precarious work is that they ask both *more* and *less* of work. They ask more in the sense that they are often will not persist in jobs that are unsatisfying and poorly paid. They ask less in the sense that men find meaning and identity in pursuits outside of the realm of work, which sets them in contrast with earlier depictions of working-class masculinity built upon the disciplined self (Lamont 2000). These men exhibit what I term their vocational selves, which connotes both the way men seek meaning in life and the way they more fluently talk about their relational and emotional selves. Asking more and less of work are two sides of the same coin: both suggest that men have less attachment to their work.

Men in this study share much in common with men in recent treatments of the working class: many in this study have dim employment prospects and have faced numerous personal and employment challenges, including health problems, broken and complex families, and drug and alcohol abuse. Yet the men in this study diverge from these other recent profiles one important sense: they seem remarkably content with their lives. Evidence for this emerges as men talk about their situations, but also because few of the men would change anything about their pasts even if they could. Why do these men have such a different view of their situations? I argue that the rural aspect of their identities provides a sense of grounding that shelters them from the vicissitudes of the uncertainty around them. Not only do these men live in a rural place, most of them have

proactively chosen rural place, as discussed in Chapter 3. Those in the study who are less connected to rural place also show less contentment.

"You Don't Make Big Plans": The Future as Luxury

For those in this study with secure jobs, a question about the future had a predictable answer: same company, higher pay (either from promotion or wage increases bargained collectively—or both), and closer to retirement with a pension.[66] Jacob works in law enforcement and is part of a union, and his thinking about the future is guided by his retirement timeline at work: "Yeah, about 14 more. That's when I'll... I will be eligible for a full pension at that time." Dustin, who works in health care management, does not have union protection but has a certain measure of employment security by virtue of being in management. He hopes his current job will be his last: "Yeah, I'd be fine if I could retire from here, it would be great. Hopefully I don't have to look anywhere else." Brett who started his own company, sees the business itself as his retirement plan: "They can buy it, but I'm not giving it to anybody; this is my retirement fund, you know, basically I'm going to only be able to do it for so long. And when I'm ready to retire, it's going to be, 'let's sell everything off.'" Austin, who works for the federal government, spoke in detail about obscure federal legislation that might threaten the work of his particular department, showing that he was invested in his work enough to track such developments (or that his union or coworkers kept him informed). For Jeremiah, who was recently promoted into a research and development role at the food-

66 Also see Chapter 4, Union Membership.

related manufacturer where he works, has a newfound interest in going back to school born of his promotion:

> Uh, I want to... so, I never really had direction other than the bike school thing for what I wanted to do, but now I have another goal for some more education that I want. Penn State offers a food science, uh, certification, and I'd like to go for that. It's a four-day class that they offer at main campus in June, and I'd like to go take it to get the certificate. I want to understand the science behind why different things work the way that they work."

And for Blake, who just finished his commitment to the Coast Guard, wants a career with the fire department in because he will have a clear retirement timeline: "And then hopefully, one day, you know, that would give me—I would probably be in the fire department for 20 years." Overall, secure jobs gave men the luxury to think about and plan for the future.

But what about men with less secure employment? When asked about the future, the overriding sense among these men is that they do not think about the future, or at least have little idea what the future holds. Because men do not expect work to last, questions about the future no longer have easy answers built-in as features of employment itself. Seth, who now works in a union shop, used to work in lumber and expressed the sense of utter precarity in that line of work:

> Yeah, I mean it was always a struggle. It was, this job one day, I knew I could lose those jobs. Especially the lumber business, I knew any minute it could be over. It could be… tomorrow could be the day. The price could fall through the roof and then boom, back on unemployed sitting at home.

Steve, who has worked manual jobs in several precarious industries and is currently unemployed, captures this present-orientation: "I try to live my life one day at a

time. You don't make big plans." Paul, a rare man to lose a union job,[67] sounded a similar note: "Um... I don't like to think ahead. I don't... I don't wanna have or be thrown off by my expectations of what I think I should be." And Zach, who has worked for the same local company for eleven years, nonetheless links his present-orientation to uncertainty at work:

> Um, funny, 'cause I really don't think that far ahead most days. Um, it's kind of… as far as work, it's kind of up in the air because I'm not sure how long my boss plans on running the business she has because she's nearing retirement age, and so I'm not sure what's going to happen there.

For those in precarious work with plans, they were often general and not tied to a particular career trajectory. George, who worked in the service sector for years before moving to manufacturing, had hopes for his family but did not know if his current work would be part of the future: "Settled down into some place that, you know, there's a good chance that's where we are going to spend the rest of our lives. Um, whether I'm still where I'm working now or not, I don't know, you know. I'm open to anything." Alex, a recovering alcoholic who works as a direct care assistant, is another example of this nebulous thinking: "In five years, I'd like to have my own place, my own, I mean, my own house, maybe. I'll have my car... my truck by then. Uh, maybe, uh, even, uh, maybe even downtown in... in a better job situation, cause it's really, there's no life at this place." Corey, currently unemployed, also just offered a general vision of his future: "Um, realistically, the crew is out of the question with that, so ideally a decent position,

67 Paul lost his job when he forgot to renew his driver's license, which was needed for his work, during a time of personal turmoil.

you know, like an operating position or maintenance, just something to keep us going, you know?"

To this point, we see that the relative security or precarity of work influences how men view and plan for the future. But there is evidence that job security is even more valuable to men than additional pay or opportunities for promotion. Seth has been offered the chance to move into management, and his main reasons for turning it down was that he would lose union protection:

> Well, I really like what I do there. So, I don't know if I'm gonna continue to float at this position at the shop or not. I have had some chances to move into management position. But it always gets me skeptical because the last time that the market dipped, they walked 200 management people out like that, you know. It's crazy, we had 127 union guys, 460 on the salary side. You know, engineers, field services, parts people, all the way down through the line just at our little shop. And it was always crazy for us that there's, we build all this stuff and there's all these other people. So the first time the field services job come open, I, uh, they were talking about my, uh, no, I, I don't wanna do it.

Similarly, Don, who has worked in the same job tending gas wells for 22 years, has seen two large layoffs and has turned down management offers in favor of what he sees as a safer role: "So, I've always believed the closer you are to the well, the safer you are in the company. And that's proved to be true because we've got one foreman, 12 well tenders left, so…".

Men seem to prefer security over higher wages. Jeremy, who held many jobs and even had two extended spells outside the labor force in his twenties, got a job with the state of Pennsylvania in his mid-thirties with the help of his wife. Although he makes $13.31 an hour, which is less than $30,000 annually, Jeremy's future plans now revolve around the security of his work: "Wherever I go, I plan on staying within the state system. I plan on retiring from the state." He knew exactly what he needed to retire:

"Twenty-five, as of right now twenty years is retirement. If you do twenty-five or more, you retain all your benefits after retirement without having to pay for them." He is also already thinking about contingencies in case he and his wife opt for him to retire early: "So, I'd have to see what the penalties would be, see how my body's doing at that time, see how the job's going at that time, see how we are financially." And Gary, who left a unionized job with the school district when he was continually passed over for advancement, now regrets that decision and is trying to get his old job back:

> I want to get back to the school, I've been trying to get back to the school for a couple of years. But the boss is not giving me the time of day. So, when I turn in the application this time, I'm going to talk to the superintendent, and I'm gonna say, "Hey, you promised me a job when I quit, that I'd get my job back when I wanted it, and this guy isn't giving me an interview, I'd at least want an interview, to give me a chance to get back in there."

A final bit of indirect evidence of the effects of work on men's future orientation is the way some men talked about paths not taken. A common regret for men was either not enlisting in the military or not staying in if they had served. However, this regret was not born from nostalgia about the service, but the longing for a clear retirement timeline. Justin, who left the Army about a decade ago, still referred to his retirement timeline had he stayed in: "… I knew I needed to get out of the Army, which I honestly didn't know if I was gonna make a career out of it or not, which I would be retiring in.... three and a half, four years. I'd be retiring in four years if I would have stayed in." Now an elementary school teacher at a Christian school, Justin likes his work but does not get any retirement benefits. When asked about his future plans, Justin was unsure, but his comments revolved around retirement: "I'll probably try to find a job in public school so that I can retire someday." Brandon, who served eight years in the Army, also spoke about that twenty-year threshold: "When I first started, I wanted to make the twenty years

then get out. After that, I seen what the twenty-year people were like. Each one had some kind of quirk to them or something. I was like, 'it's probably not a good idea.'"

Finally, the lack of a future plan was also present among those men with low labor force attachment. Brad, who draws disability for back problems, talked about possibly going back to school for nursing, but when asked where he saw himself in five years, he replied: "Hmm... I can honestly say, I don't think I've ever thought of it." As he explained, "I take every day at a time. So, I don't want to think where I'm going to be in five years and then five years I'm not there, it gives me something to be disappointed about." Carl is an extreme case of not thinking about the future. Never able to stick with formal employment, Carl has chosen to forego traditional adulthood in favor of living life in the moment. Not only does Carl not have career plans, he often does not know where the day will lead: "That's the thing is, I don't—I don't know what I'm doing tomorrow, you know? I don't know what I'm doing later today." While seemingly rootless, Carl has actively chosen to resist the strictures of contemporary work. It is part and parcel to his worldview: "But really, I don't have any plan on what I want to do. It's a way for me."

More and Less

How do men construct identity in a world where work often is not meaningful or well-paid and in which imagining five years ahead may as well be fifty? I find that men in this study ask both *more* and *less* of work. They ask *more* in the sense that men care about the nature of their work and are less willing to countenance work that is not personally fulfilling or at least tolerable, especially when it does not pay well enough to justify the conditions. But men also ask *less* of work in the sense that at least some men

have deemphasized the role of work in their identities. Men still value work, but they also find meaning in other spheres like family, church, friendship, and hobbies. Rather than identity being centered around "the disciplined self" (Lamont 2000), I find that men have vocational selves, where they are most animated by largely non-work pursuits.

More

For those with secure jobs, especially jobs with union protections and a defined time horizon for retiring with a full pension, there is tremendous incentive to stay with their work as long as possible, even if aspects of it are less desirable. But for men in less secure work, there is less reason to stay in jobs where the pay is poor or the conditions are unfavorable. Ryan, for example, has churned among a series of low-wage jobs, which could be interpreted as a lack of interest in work or lack of commitment to a single employer. But for Ryan, his movement among employers reflects his concerns about the working conditions or the fit of jobs with his skills or life circumstance. He left work at a manufacturing facility after just three months because he said most of the workers were drunk or high. He then worked three years in a physically-demanding, poorly-paid job that he finally left because he felt management did not respect their lunches and breaks. He left another manual job because it required travel that took him away from his newborn daughter. He even tried telemarketing but found it a poor fit for his skills. Most recently, he has worked for a year stocking shelves at a grocery store, but he is frustrated at the store's refusal to give him more than part-time hours and the lack of opportunity to move up. Ryan has never made more than $9 an hour, so his churning is adaptive: it does not make sense for him to stay in jobs that are undesirable, especially when there are

other, similarly-paid jobs available that might turn out better. Further, as we saw in Chapter 2, Ryan can make as much money under-the-table as he does with these near-minimum-wage jobs, which explains why Ryan took two different breaks from formal work during which he did occasional day labor and helped out more at home.

Jeremy's case, mentioned earlier in this chapter and also in Chapter 2, provides both a comparison to and counter-factual for Ryan. Jeremy worked for a painting company in high school, and after graduating, Jeremy eventually moved up to running his own crew making $11.50 an hour. However, after repeated clashes with his boss, Jeremy finally quit in a demonstration that work conditions mattered to him:

> The job itself wasn't that bad, but every time something would go wrong or something of that nature, it was always everybody else's fault but the boss. Um, one instance I'll use. For example, I told him that the one van was not safe to use, water pump was going out of it. From Punxsutawney to Sigel, coming up Route 36, we had to put over fifteen gallons of water into the radiator because the leak was so bad. That's not so far of a trip. And ended up blowing up the motor, and it was my fault because we didn't keep enough water in it. At two o'clock in the morning, where are you supposed to get water in the middle of nowhere? That was pretty much the straw that broke the camel's back on that one.

From there until his mid-thirties, Jeremy's labor force experiences looked much like Ryan. Jeremy churned through a series of low-wage jobs, including two longer stints outside the labor force. Jeremy's prospects changed when he met his wife and she helped him navigate the state of Pennsylvania's application process. He was offered a job, and as described earlier, Jeremy's outlook changed from contingency to commitment. After working at no less than eight places in his twenties and early thirties—and never for more than the $11.50 he made just after high school—Jeremy has plans to stay in his current work for the twenty-five years required to realize his pension, even though his current

wage of $13.31 an hour is only marginally better than what he made painting after high school.

For some men, even healthy wages are not enough to make up for undesirable conditions in the absence of long-term job security. As discussed in Chapter 3, several men who were long-haul truck drivers left that work—not because it did not pay well—but because the men missed time with family or simply did not like being away. Others have found that they deeply dislike factory work, even when it pays well. After serving in the Marines and then earning his associate degree in welding, Dennis worked in a factory for almost $20 an hour. He was laid off and now works as a lineman for the public utility. "Looking back on it now," he says, "I realize how much I hate factory work." If he lost his current job, he would not go back to a factory: "And, like, I really—like, if I lost my job and had to go back to the factory, I think I would do something different, self-employed something, you know?" Scott, who works in fast food, has also been cured of factory work:

> … I worked at molded fiberglass for... like, eight months at one, at one point in my life, and that was just an awful job, working with fiberglass in general. It was terrible. Um, but after that, I just kind of, I was like, if I can stay away from the shop job, or life, I will, but I've seen the effects that shops can do to people. Loud machinery, causing people to go harder to hear, or completely deaf, and so if I can avoid stuff like that, I will. Trying to make my life a little bit easier.

While the work that some of the men do is demanding and dangerous, there is also evidence that men value their physical well-being and are not willing to take certain risks, even for additional money. Nick, who operates heavy equipment for $14.65 an hour, says he could make $20 an hour at another local company, but it would be driving a truck that he describes as dangerous to drive. For him, the extra $5 an hour is not worth it:

> There's a lot of risk involved in winch truck operator. That's why you go up to [another local company], which is three or four more miles away, and drive a winch truck for twenty dollars an hour. I don't want that kind of responsibility. That's why I wouldn't go there, plus it's a little further to drive.

The flipside is that men expect to be paid for the risks they take, or they at least have an awareness when they feel they are not paid for the risks of their work. Casey, who is a new employee at a steel mill, explains: "I think being at a place where you could die at any moment, you should be worth more than $12.10, but it is what it is. Around here, it's probably the best job that you're going to find when it comes to pay." In the longer term, Casey, who is a recovering drug and alcohol addict, hopes to go to school for psychology and become a drug and alcohol counselor. Men also demonstrated that they would take less money for better or different working conditions. Dan, who also is a general laborer at a steel mill, is planning to apply for a job in maintenance with a local municipality because he wants a first shift job. He'd make the switch, even if the new job pays less:

> I, I do enjoy the [steel mill] job, and I like the people I work with, but that swing shift is just so hard, and there is coming up an opening downtown at the… borough office. So, if it was even just a couple bucks less than what I make, it would be worth it, just to you know, have a straight day shift job.

While the extrinsic rewards or work matter, intrinsic rewards matter as well, which for many men in this study has to do with working outside or doing manual labor, which factors into how they assess the desirability of their work. As Steve says simply, "Oh yeah, as long as I'm outside, I'm happy." Don has been fortunate to work outside for both of his jobs. After dropping out of college, he worked two years at a farm: "I loved it there before. You know, I like working with the animals outside." For the last 22 years, he has tended gas wells. Asked what he likes about his work, he mentions being outside

and having autonomy: “Outside. Outside. Nobody is breathing down your neck. You just do what you’ve got to do.” He adds, “I like the physical labor part of it.” Dennis, who has sworn off factory work and is an avid hunter in his leisure time, likes that his current work is outdoors: “Using the trucks, and yeah, it was fun, I enjoyed it, I really liked it, it’s outside. I’m an outside kind of guy.” Seth connects the nature of his work to his propensity to engage in risky behavior like drinking: “So, I had some growing pains with that, but I liked being outside and I always liked to work outside with my hands. When I had an office job, I hated it. I was miserable. I drank three times as much more when I worked in an office than I ever did when I worked in like manufacturing or outside.”

While work that was outside and manual were generally most preferred, not all men hated office work, and what counted as manual labor was in the eye of the beholder. Kyle, who worked for a few years in customer service, would not be opposed to going back: “Um, I, I’d probably just, I’d be happy just to go back to a cube farm, that doesn’t bother me at all.” But even Kyle, who currently works in the deli of a grocery store, likes the tangible nature of his current work: “Um, the meat cutting part of it I actually enjoyed… just because it is an actual skill that I can then use later, you know what I mean, and actually use in a regular everyday life kind of setting.” And what counts as manual labor is in the eye of the beholder. Gary, who works as a personal care aide and would like to eventually earn his CNA credential, sees his work as manual labor: “If I can work with my hands, I’m happy.” Keith has only worked in food service, but he sees it as manual labor since he is on his feet: “I got to do the manual labor. I’m not about to sit down and do a bunch of busy work.” Ryan, on the other hand, would not work in fast

food—not because he is embarrassed or thinks the work is undignified—but because he sees it as an unacceptable combination of inside and not physically demanding:

> It's not like embarrassment, it just, you know, sitting there watching what they're doing, it don't look hard. It just—uh, then again, I meant stuck inside. I'm not really doing anything, heavy lifting. I like to, you know, kinda stay active. I'm not the skinniest or the most muscular guy, but I like doing something where I feel like, at the end of the day, it's nice to take my boots off and have a beer and feel like I earned it, you know. And I'm not saying people that work at McDonald's don't, it's all, it's, everybody has their, entitled to their own opinion.

Ryan, who makes just $0.25 more than minimum wage, likes the physical nature of his current work stocking shelves, and he even goes as far as to create challenges for himself on the job:

> … I unloaded the whole truck, I put everything on a shelf, I get home and I am ready to hit the couch. And a lot of people don't know that about a grocery clerk, but there is a lot of hard work involved, there really is. Some of the things I lift, you know, or I'll even challenge myself, and instead of lifting the dog food, putting it up, I'll lift two or three and slam 'em up there, you know, fifty pounds apiece. Okay, here's a hundred and fifty pounds. To where I get home and I'm like, yeah, I deserve this beer. I'm gonna have a beer and kick my feet back, you know?

The idea that men ask more of their work is not to say that some men do not brook difficult conditions. Steve, who once worked a job in the oil industry that required nine days on before getting three days off, did not like that arrangement (nor did his wife), but he rationalized it was part of the job. When asked if he liked that scheduling arrangement, he replied, "Uh, not really, but if your job calls for it, it's what you've got to do." Charles, who described his time as a telemarketer in the starkest terms ("Felt like a dog gnawing at... gnawing at a cage"), still concluded that it was better than nothing: "It was... not the... how you say... not the ideal setting, but, you know, money's money." The job required an hour's drive each way, which made for long days, and he often worked Saturdays, which did not give him a true weekend. Earning just $10.28 an hour, he still

stayed at the job for four-and-a-half years, only leaving when he was let go in a mass layoff.

In sum, while decisions about employment are always calculations about the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of work, evidence from this study shows that calculations are more complex in a world where employment is insecure. Wages matter, but so do working conditions and the desirability of the job. For men in this study, work that is outside or manual trumps work that is inside or sedentary, wages being equal. Relationships with bosses and coworkers also matter. As Jerry, who works at a convenience store, says: "I don't know, it's just the atmosphere at work that matters to me rather than what I'm actually doing, which makes it harder to decide what I want to do." Because few jobs offer a level of pay or the long-term security that make them indispensable, men are free to continually seek to improve their employment situation. However, for most men, this just means shifting among jobs that are different in degree, not kind.

Less

While the uncertain nature of working-class work allows men to ask more of work, it also results in men asking less of work in the sense that many men spoke of nonwork pursuits as important parts of their identities. With work largely unpredictable in the long-term and not meaningful or well-paid in the present, men have found meaning in other pursuits, thus deemphasizing the role of work in their self-conceptions. Men like or value their work to greater or lesser degrees, but to take them at their word, they find *meaning* in hobbies, civic involvements, and other non-work pursuits. Even among men

with secure work, there is evidence of this deemphasis of work as part of identity in favor of extracurricular pursuits. In fact, some men want secure employment precisely because it will allow them to do other things on the side. These findings are in keeping with work that shows an increasing preference among men of all labor-market positions for meaningful life outside of work (Cherlin 2014) and the idea that working-class men have generative pursuits (Edin et al. 2019). Finally, in some extreme cases, men have given up on work as a source of identity altogether.

For many men, their hobbies conform to traditional expectations of working-class, masculine pursuits. Dan, who works at a steel mill in a job he is looking to leave, finds enjoyment in tinkering with vehicles; he says he's been "playing around forever with old junk cars." The evidence is plain to see, as Dan's yard is strewn with vehicles and parts: "… we do a lot of projects around here, as you can see, like that jeep." In fact, during the interview at his home, his brother-in-law, who was working while the interview took place, interrupted several times to talk to Dan about engines and parts. Other men like to tinker with vehicles, including Dennis, Mark, Evan, and Wes. Steve once competed in dirt-track stock car racing, and he still builds cars from the ground up: "Racing is my favorite pastime." He was eager to show pictures of his handiwork, and it would be his ideal job "if there was actually money in it." It is a hobby he got from his father ("I have worked on race cars since I was pretty much old enough to hold a wrench."), and he has passed it on to his son. Richard likes to ride his four-wheeler; Wes rides dirt bikes; and many of the men are avid hunters and fishermen. Several men have been involved at one time or another in local volunteer fire departments, including Jeremy, who is currently an assistant chief for a small municipality.

Numerous men in the study expressed a love of playing music, with several men playing publicly in bands and a couple even having CDs. Justin, the Army veteran turned elementary school teacher, has a self-produced CD and plays paying gigs with a cover band: “I love to play music, that would be you know... if you had a pipe dream, that would be the one. It would be able to play guitar and sing and, but that’s not really a career, you know? Even for people that do it all the time, it’s really a pursuit, you know?” I accompanied Justin to his performance at a local talent show, which he won. Doug, who has mostly worked in restaurants, has also been part of niche bands that have had success in the US and even abroad through online dissemination of their work. He, like Justin, wishes he could make a living on music alone: “And like, I don’t know, somehow, I just thought everything would work out and I never thought I was going to have to like have a normal job. I thought I would be a musician.” Ryan, who stocks shelves, plays drums in a couple bands, one of which is starting to get paid work: “But uh, I’m trying to get, well, now the band, I’m gonna start coming into a little more money ‘cuz we’re starting to get paid gigs, you know. Local honky-tonks, if you will.” Ryan also loves music and has aspirations bigger than his small town:

> Overall, I [wish] truthfully, music is the, the thing I know the best. If I could, you know, if I didn’t live in such small town, ‘cuz I’ve wrote originals, too. I mean, I’ve, one of my bands that was playing every week, we actually cut a demo. And was, I’ve been offered tours at least three times in my life, and just didn’t have the right set-up. Like the one time, uh, the band that was recording and had a demo, we had six songs on our demo—EP, whatever you wanna call it—we got offered a tour. We were even playing just shows where just straight our music, not, uh, covers.
>
> … But I can’t break into something like music around here. It’s too tough. There’s no scene for it. I mean, there is, but there’s not.

Vince plays in a classic rock cover band that has six or seven gigs a year; he would be a musician tomorrow if he could do anything. Many other men are involved in music: Brad, Carl, Casey, Frank, Gabe, Jeff, Jeremiah, Phil, and Thomas all play or sing, several currently with bands. Thomas not only plays but makes instruments; his ideal life would be as "… a family man traveling playing bluegrass music through the country." A few men have other artistic pursuits. Several men in the study work full- or part-time in tattooing or piercing, which itself is a mix of occupation and vocation. Zach, who works as a graphic designer and tattoo artist, also does fine art painting on the side. Austin is an amateur photographer.

Some men have more generative pursuits that express their desire to do good in the world or pay forward lessons learned from their own struggles. Several men volunteer in capacities related to their struggles with addiction. Casey, a recovering addict, volunteers at his church and is active in recovery groups:

> Being a recovering addict, alcoholic myself, that's where my heart is every day. I sponsor people like the youth kids. One of my favorite things is when I see that there is a troubled kid coming in because I get to see me in them and I get to speak life over their life because of what I've experienced. So that's really what I do. I'm a steel worker, I'm a youth leader, I'm a sponsor in NA.

Similarly, Don draws on his struggle with addiction in his work as a sponsor for AA: "I sponsor a bunch of guys, they sponsor guys. You know what I mean? I'm on the phone all day off and on with other recovering alcoholics." Curtis ran a support group for awhile, although the group has since disbanded: "It was good while it lasted." He is open to future involvements and has recently been asked to speak at a new group that just formed.

Working with youth is another common pursuit. Derek has coached youth wrestling for fourteen years, and William and Keith have coached different children and youth sports. Although Austin makes a good living for the federal government, his volunteering with the Boy Scouts is where he draws most value: "You know, I could easily go to six figures if I was willing to work overtime, but being involved in Scouting, I get more energized out of that than sitting for eight hours a day [doing my job]." His work puts him in touch with many families who are struggling. He says people are resourceful, but many are hurting. For example, he does not like to ask them to sell things: "How many more piles of popcorn can you ask these people to hit their grandmother or their aunt up for?" Jordan and Cameron are both involved with the youth group at their churches.

A few men have hobbies not yet mentioned. Several men invest great time and energy in personal fitness, with a couple men even thinking of it as a future career. Jeremiah is an avid mountain biker, which involves not only riding, but volunteering to maintain and even create local trails. George loves comic books and collectables to the point where his ideal job would be to run a comic book shop. A few men have hobbies that connect with their desires to live more self-sustaining lives. Keith eventually wants to live "off the grid," but for now, he is content to garden with his father, with whom he still lives. Paul, who works the front desk at a rehab facility, talked at length about his efforts to grow food:

> Um, getting a jump on you know, growing vegetables even in such a, I have a little area to grow vegetables here, I've learned how to you know do the best I can, I grow out of you know, grow tomatoes and stuff out of buckets. Ah, a few years ago, this whole porch was filled with different planters and stuff like I managed to grow melons um, cantaloupes out here, a couple different pumpkins, peas the neighbors come up with peas. Getting' better at growin' carrots, those

> are simple. Didn't do real good with tomatoes last year. Uh, got a late start. Not gonna happen this year, I'm all...I'm getting ready for it, getting' it all planned out.

He hopes to eventually work up to having his own animals and bees, growing his own herbal medicines, and even generating his own electricity using wind and solar power. Blake has more hobbies than he has time: "I can run sewing machines, I can run table saws, and I can make, you know, lots of stuff and, you know, I make my own bullets. And, you know, and I train dogs and whatnot."

Despite stereotypes of less-educated men as obsessive video gamers (Hurst 2016), few of the men mentioned gaming as a primary hobby, although several play. Brandon, a veteran on disability with anxiety and a dislike of crowds, spends a lot of time gaming, mostly World of Warcraft. Evan, who works at a convenience store, estimates he plays Call of Duty about two hours a day. Gabe, who has struggled to maintain labor force attachment (see Chapter 2), showed deep familiarity with video games, but he sold his old gaming system over a year ago for $75 to fund a date. Given his limited means, he has not yet had the money to even buy an older system to replace it. He's a gamer, but with the caveat that he needs a system: "But, um, so yeah, it's, when I have the system handy, yeah, I would consider myself a gamer." Similar to Gabe, Troy has limited labor force attachment and limited financial means. For Troy, he has a cell phone but no cell service, so he relies on free Wi-Fi to access online games and communities. When he is online, he participates in chat rooms and video chats with people from around the world: "There's people that I've talked to that are from China all over Europe."

A few men had more constructive relationships with gaming. Kyle, who used to work in customer service and now works in a deli, is a gamer, but his interest overlaps

with his interest in computers, one of which he recently built: “I’m really into computers, actually just built my own computer a little while ago, probably about a month ago.” Not only does it serve as his gaming computer, he figures the time invested was worth what he saved by doing it himself:

> Yeah, just from scratch, I just buy a case of all the parts, and me and my friend assemble it. So, it took us about four hours or so to get it fully assembled, but um, we ended up computer costing like eight or nine hundred bucks instead of buying one for eighteen hundred, so the time was worth it for me.

Christian, who has training in IT, also likes to work with computers as a hobby; his ideal job would be dealing with “the latest and greatest technology.” And for Adrian, playing Xbox is what brought him to Pennsylvania:

> And I met a friend through Xbox gaming online who lived here in [northwestern Pennsylvania]. And yeah, we’d play Xbox for probably three, four, maybe five years and he was wanting to move out of his grandparents’ house and get an apartment but needed a roommate, and like I said, I was in anywhere-but-here mode. So, I said our interests are aligned, I’ll try to make arrangements and that’s why here.

Unfortunately for Adrian, the living arrangement did not work out and he has struggled to maintain work in Pennsylvania, but the original connection would not have been possible without gaming. Trevor has also found community online, in his case in the form of a closed group he started ten years ago as a place of refuge for him of others during turbulent times in life: “… we help each other out, you know…” He tells of one time when he talked a friend in the group through a “suicidal phase”. The group became so meaningful that—as Trevor tells it—his wife grew so jealous of the group that she issued an ultimatum that it was either the group of her; he chose the group: “… the [group] was a hell of a lot nicer to me than she was.”

Finally, while not the same as a hobby, several men found meaning outside of work in the form of religion.[68] Several of the men in recovery attribute their recovery to faith, and a few of them volunteer with their churches in recovery groups and beyond. Cameron, Justin, Jordan, Sam, and Thomas are in lay leadership at their churches; Scott volunteers at a Christian camp; and Patrick would someday like to be a pastor. Most who spoke of church attend nondenominational or theologically evangelical congregations, and these men have the tendency to interpret their life experiences through the lens and language of Christian faith. However, not all who spoke about religion were uniformly conservative. Paul, for example, invoked God when discussing his acceptance of gay persons ("Um, God created us all, and I even as a young kid, I knew that people were going to be gay, I knew."). Greg, a tattoo artist, attends a mainline church and says he faithfully tithes ten percent of his income. Several men mentioned being raised in observant Christian homes but leaving religion as adults. One man, himself a recovering addict, identifies as Pagan and called religion an addiction, casting aspersions on those who use faith as a crutch in recovery: "I didn't go to like AA or NA meetings and give credit to God or anything else because that's what they do. They get clean and then it's God that did it instead of them realizing how strong they themselves can be." And another man in the study was a convert to Islam and spoke at some length about his experience as a religious minority:

> And, but—but being here, I enjoy being a Muslim here, because the conservatives who don't even get to have a sample of what a Muslim is, they—they turn on the television and they see Fox News, or—or any news, I don't agree with any—any

68 Because not all men were explicitly asked about their religious lives, many did not speak of religion one way or another.

> news that's on the television, but—but they see the news and most around here are conservatives who watch probably Fox News and stuff.
>
> … when they meet me, they're just like, "Oh," so, like, they start asking questions about Islam and they actually start to learn, like—like, what it is, why people are—are doing crazy things, and then, you know, why, you know—and—it's cool, because around here, it's such a small town… most of the people already know me.

Whether hunting, fishing, racing, firefighting, music, art, counseling, volunteering, fitness, or gaming, the men in this study evince a wide range of hobbies that are—at the least—diversionary, and are at most, generative and community-building. In a world where working-class work is often tedious, lacks meaning, and is poorly paid, men in this study have looked elsewhere for a sense of purpose. Doug, a self-taught chef and musician, captures this pursuit of meaning in an extended monologue that is as much sermon as statement:

> And it's like you should fucking find something that you like to do so you don't feel like you're never accomplishing anything. It doesn't have to be something that's like you can sell or something that, is that like a commodity or anything. Just be like, you know what, if you want to like start gardening or making soap or doing anything to like—
>
> Because you can find ways and all those hobbies to like elevate yourself to learn more. I just think anything where you're engaging in the world around you and like and like making sense of something and kind of like putting something into practice, doing some of your hands or mind is it's just good for you as a human being. It helps you to like, at least for me, it makes me feel like there's more meaning in life.
>
> 'Cuz you kind of make your own meaning, you know. It's like, well, what are we here for? I don't know how to create things to like just keep making more complex things and making ourselves more and more complex. That's just what the nature of reality is, I guess.

Contentment in Uncertain Times

This study is not unique in finding that working-class young adults face what Silva describes as a "standard life course [that] has grown increasingly uncertain, unpredictable, and risky" (2013: 95). However, what is different among the men in the study is how they have responded. While recent treatments of the working class find them angry and hardened, the men in this study—despite facing similar circumstances—are noticeably content. To form the basis for this contrast, I first offer summaries of two recent treatments of the working-class, *Coming Up Short* (Silva 2013) and *Labor's Love Lost* (Cherlin 2014). Silva's book is based upon interviews with 100 working-class men and women in Lowell, Massachusetts and Richmond, Virginia, small cities of about 100,000 and 200,000, respectively. She defines working class as having a father without a college degree, which allows for her respondents themselves to have post-secondary education and still qualify as working class. One-quarter of her respondents have a bachelor's degree or more, including four with a master's degree, and a majority have at least some college. The average age of her respondents is 27, and all respondents are between twenty-four and thirty-four. Her respondents are split equally between men and women, with 60 percent being white and 40 percent being African American. Her interviews took place from late 2008 through early 2010 during and in the immediate aftermath of The Great Recession. Compared with the men in this study, her respondents are on average younger, better educated, and more urban, not to mention the obvious fact that her sample includes women and non-white respondents. The interviews took place at a particularly difficult time economically, although arguably many of the broader forces

she highlights—the decline of manufacturing, capital flight, and the rise of service jobs—remain true.[69]

In Chapter 4, subtitled "The Remaking of the American Working Class," Silva addresses "the consequences of the neoliberal turn at the level of the *self*" (2013: 83). In particular, she asks, "What does it mean to become working class in the post-industrial economy?" (2013: 83). She paints a stark picture: her respondents experience constant betrayal in various realms of life, which teaches them "that they are completely alone, responsible for their own fates and dependent on outside help only at their peril" (2013: 83). According to Silva, her respondents treat others with suspicion and distrust, hardening themselves against social and political institutions, including the military.[70] For Silva, the evidence of "self-reliance and rugged individualism" (2013: 98) among her respondents, in which they resist dependence and "make a virtue out of not asking for help" (2013: 97), is a coping mechanism to the constant uncertainty and betrayal. These traits, while ostensibly positive, have "a darker side", leading them to cut ties, turn inward, and numb themselves emotionally (2013: 97). In Silva's view, her respondents are "acquiescing neoliberal subjects" (2013: 109) who reject social safety nets and solidarities in favor of the "cultural scripts of self-reliance, individualism, and personal responsibility" (2013: 109).

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69 Silva notes in the Appendix that the men in her sample who were more likely to take a traditional path to adulthood were from Lowell, which she attributes to the fact that Lowell has larger public and private sector unions with a more robust manufacturing base, whereas Richmond has seen more capital flight and is in a state with less friendly labor policies.

70 Despite the severe picture Silva paints of the lives of her respondents, the anecdotes she presents often describe her respondents as hard-working, pleasant, grateful, and generous.

In *Labor's Love Lost* (2014), Cherlin also paints a portrait of the current state of working-class young adults. For Cherlin, the working class of interest are the less-educated, defined as those without bachelor's degrees, a slightly more restrictive definition than Silva's. In Chapter 6, conducted in collaboration with Timothy Nelson, Cherlin draws upon both qualitative and quantitative sources in describing current state of the less-educated working class.[71] As with Silva's work, Cherlin finds that a "traditional, working-class life" (2014: 152) has moved out-of-reach for most of the interviewees: just one of thirty-three men had a continuous work history and all of his children within marriage. The men's lives represent a tangle of "unfortunate choices" while facing a "difficult labor market" (2014: 153) that is characterized by mutual distrust and disengagement between employers and employees (2014: 154). Much working-class employment is now subject to casualization (see Sassen 2000, 2018), in which work is of limited term, contractual but not absolute, and lightly regulated. As for how working-class men have adjusted to these changes, Cherlin describes the transition from the "utilitarian self" to the "expressive self" (2014: 159), in which emphasis has moved from self-control and conformity to personal fulfillment and communicating one's feelings and emotions. Invoking Silva, Cherlin finds commonalities between their sets of interviews: the lives of young adults are centered on overcoming trauma and self-development, and men have tenuous attachments to work, religion and family (also see Edin et al. 2019). In

71 The qualitative sample includes interviews by Nelson and a collaborator with thirty-three men from Boston, Chicago, and Cleveland between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five with at least one child conducted in 2012 and 2013. In comparison with Silva's sample, Cherlin's is smaller, all male, and restricted to fathers. Cherlin's interviews were conducted a couple years after Silva's, although certainly still in the long shadow of The Great Recession. In Cherlin's words, the men are "probably more down-and-out than the typical high school-educated dad" (2014:153). Both Silva and Cherlin have exclusively urban samples with nearly identical age ranges.

sum, Cherlin choses three descriptors to capture the current lives of working-class men: "[c]asualization, disengagement, rootlessness" (2014: 174).

There are many points of agreement between the lives of the men in this study and those interviewed by Silva and Nelson.[72] Men are united in facing a changed and changing labor market, and relatively few men have continuous labor force histories, as seen in Chapter 2, or secure work, as seen in Chapters 2 and 4. As discussed earlier in this chapter, men have responded to these changes, in part, by seeking meaning outside of the world of work. Regarding family life, while the men in this study are not as nontraditional as Cherlin's, there is still a relatively high degree of complexity in family arrangements. The marital status of the 61 men at the time of the interview is presented in Table 1. About half of the men were married at the time of the interview, and of those men, six had been married at least once before. Six of the men were divorced, and another three men were separated. Altogether, about two-thirds of the men were either currently married or have been married. Twenty-three of the men had never been married, although some of these men still had children, and a few were cohabiting. Many of those who have never married are younger, so it is likely that at least some of them will eventually marry.

72 Based upon the labor force histories, educational attainment, and family composition, the men in this study are likely—on average—slightly more advantaged than those interviewed by Nelson for Cherlin's work and slightly less advantaged than Silva's.

Table 5.1: Current Marital Status

	Total (N = 61)	Percent*
Married	29	48
Divorced	6	10
Separated	3	5
Never married	23	38

* Does not total to 100 due to rounding

Next, Table 2 shows the current household composition of the men in the study, giving particular attention to resident children. About 40 percent of the men currently have no children living with them, which includes men who have never had children and those who currently live apart from their biological kids due to divorce or separation. Almost half the men live with only their biological children. In many cases, these are traditional arrangements with a wife and one or more biological children from the current partner. In a few cases, men have biological children from previous relationships who spend at least part of their time in the household. These children are still biological and not step, but the arrangement involves more than family. Finally, only eight men live in households that include step-children.

Table 5.2: Resident Children at Time of Interview

	Total (N = 61)	Percent
No resident children	25	41
Biological children only	28	46
Blended (biological and step-children together, or step-children only)	8	13

Table 3 attempts to give a truer picture of the degree of family complexity among the men in this study that is obscured to some degree by the previous tallies of marital status and resident children. About one-quarter of the men in this study are single, have never been married, and have no children. Another 30 percent of men are married, have not previously been married, and either have no children or only have children with their current partner. In these cases, the men's partners have also not been previously married. For the remaining 27 men, which is almost half of the full sample, there is some elements of family complexity: a previous marriage by either the man or his partner; children outside of marriage; or the presence of children from other relationships, either the man's or the partner's.

Table 5.3: Lifetime Family Situation

	Total (N = 61)	Percent
Never married, no children	16	26
Currently married, never previously married, no children	3	5
Currently married with children only from current spouse	15	25
Other	27	44

Despite some commonalities between the men in this study and those in other recent studies, the greatest divergence, especially when compared to Silva's respondents, is how the men have responded. As she writes, "… the sheer force of these emotions—of vehement anger, defensiveness, and profound betrayal—throughout my interviews demands a more complicated explanation, one that starts from within the processual, contingent, and ongoing meaning-making of informants" (2013: 83). Where Silva finds anger, I find contentment. Where Silva and Cherlin find men turning inward, I hear of men turning outward. A quote from Justin captures the sentiment from many of the interviews:

> ... that's the thing, I think one of the biggest life lessons I've learned is when you find yourself in a position, you can either be opposed to it and be angry all the time or you can dive into and just embrace and really become a part of it. And it actually makes up for all the animosity you have towards it, so as much as I always hated this town um... complaining about it isn't helping anything, so if I get more involved with community and stuff like that, that helps so yeah.

Just as the strong negativity in Silva's interviews demands an explanation, so does the relative contentment among my respondents, especially given the fact they face the same unforgiving labor market. In what follows, I first offer additional examples of

men's contentment with their lives and situations, followed by explanations for this divergence of outlooks in response to uncertain times.

Toward the end of most interviews, I asked men what advice they would give to their sixteen-year old selves. While many men acknowledged hardships in their lives, they also often spoke of a sense of contentment with what had happened. Dan captures this common sentiment: "No, I don't think I'd do anything really different. It's been really good. I mean, even the tough experiences that I've had in life going through it I mean, were good life lessons, you know?" Dan has never had a "good job", although he has had more stability than many men. He piled lumber briefly after high school, then worked for seven years in a warehouse job where he never made more than $8.50 an hour. He took a voluntary layoff and earned his CDL, but long-haul driving was not to his liking. He worked briefly as a mechanic, and for the last ten-and-a-half years, he has worked as a general laborer at a steel mill, currently for $13.75 an hour. He likes tinkering with cars in his spare time, giving him a hobby. Single and working for most of his adult life, he recently married and has a young daughter.

But this same sentiment also comes across for men who might have more reason to seek a change. William grew up poor and saw his parents divorce when he was young. He endured a painful first marriage in which his wife openly cheated; she later died. William served in Iraq, ultimately qualifying for benefits stemming from his PTSD. Yet he likes who he is and would not change anything:

> Like everything that happens for... I just believe that everything happens for a reason. You're put in... you're put in places for a reason. And if I were to go back and change a little bit of it, I wouldn't be the person who I am today. And I'm kind of happy with that guy; I like that guy.

For some men, the sense of contentment and gratitude is a function of their own sense of mortality. Justin, who was quoted earlier about his decision to get involved rather than get angry, also said that his outlook stems from the fact that he never expected to live past thirty. At age 34, he already feels like he is living in "bonus time":

> No, no, so then I had to figure out what to do next, so I'm still trying to figure out what to do next. But having almost died so many times, it's almost like being on bonus time. This is extra innings already so I can't be in a bad mood, I decided a long time ago I don't have bad days anymore and I haven't. I get upset and I have bad hours, but I don't have bad days anymore because you know, I really shouldn't still be here. Um, but yeah. I kinda got over the idea that I was going to die once it just kept not happening.

Likewise, Curtis, who long battled addiction, can only live in the present: "I don't, I don't think about it [the future] a whole lot to be honest, man. I never saw myself being where I'm at right now. Like I'd never planned on living past 30 when I was younger, and uh, I don't know, kinda recognize that there is no way for me to predict that [the future]."

Rooted in Rural Place

The primary explanation for the lack of anger in my interviews is the connection most of these men have to rural place, which offers a sense of rootedness and identity perhaps absent among other groups of working-class men. Cherlin's interviews were conducted in large cities or their immediate suburbs, and Silva's respondents are from midsized cities but decidedly urban areas. Not only is this current study in rural place, the men interviewed have mostly proactively chosen to live there, as seen in Chapter 3. Cherlin characterizes less-educated, working-class men as casual (in the labor market sense), disengaged, and rootless. The men in this study certainly are casual (the men with

good job excepted), but these men do not seem particularly disengaged, and they are definitely not rootless. For many men, northwestern Pennsylvania is home, which has a uniquely powerful appeal that provides order to these men's lives. Jacob, a law enforcement officer, has been fortunate to travel, but there's no place like home:

> … I traveled the entire nation now for years… I've been into different countries for, you know, over throughout Europe and stuff for different reasons, um, and I've always enjoyed home. Home's home. I like to go to other places but home's home to me. I'm just a home-bound guy, that's it. Yeah. I'm just stuck here.

Blake, who has just moved back after serving in the Coast Guard, likes where he is from: "I know I liked Pennsylvania. And I like this part of Pennsylvania." A big part of the appeal is the rurality. As Randy describes, "I mean, I don't see myself going anywhere, it's where I've been all my life. And I like it, I like being in the country." Casey prefers the term backroads: "It's where home is. It's where home will always be. Um, nowhere can I find more peace than driving down a backroad. Nowhere can I find more freedom then driving down a backroad, and nowhere can I find more happiness than driving down a backroad." Cameron, a self-employed contractor who grew up on an area farm, is committed to the area: "Like that's, you know, I'm, I'm very invested into this, this area in this community. Um, both, you know, financially, spiritually, I'm just, you know, everything relationally." Even the few men are not originally from northwestern Pennsylvania also have some to see the appeal of small-town life. Victor, originally from the West Coast, sees the appeal of small-town living, particularly the intimacy: "There isn't too many places in the country, in the city, where—where, you know your kids' teachers and so on and on, and things like that. Parents have come to school and, 'Hey, that was my teacher back then!'" As long as he and his wife can find

adequate work, they plan to stay: "…obviously, this is where we want to be, and it's—and it was just job-related. It's just ideal for us."

While many men expressed great affection for "the country," they do not idealize rural life. Many saw the challenges the area faced. As Ryan said simply, "Not a very good economy around here, in my opinion." For some men, they felt torn between their love of northwestern Pennsylvania and the challenges they have had finding work. Charles has lived in the area his whole life, including during long stretches of unemployment. He articulated the ways in which it would make sense for him to move:

> Some people make the argument, you know, that wages aren't high but cost of living is lower. That may be true, but, let's say, ah... let's say you were to buy a house, or... you know, and when it comes time to retire, or whatever, you sell that house, you're not get as much for it. Or let's take the example of a 401k, you know, you go somewhere... you go some... you stay around here. Let's say you do have a retirement plan. You know, it's going to be based upon your income here. Now if you go somewhere else, you know, let's say everything else is equal, but you get more and the standard of living is higher. You can always retire from there, and come back here and have a much greater standard of living then what, ah... then what you would've by staying.

Yet Charles has never moved: "You know, my family's from here and that... this is my roots, but there's nothing here. You know, it's been real lack here." Christian, who served in the military and had a good job outside Washington, DC before he and his wife decided to move back to northwestern Pennsylvania to raise their family, does not want to move but has struggled to find work:

> I don't want to uproot the kids, but I knew if I moved to a bigger city, I'd find work pretty easily with my government background, the school, and technology background. I know in a bigger city like D.C. or wherever, you know, I wouldn't be worried about work. I know that. But I don't want to uproot the kids. We moved back here for a reason, that's to be near all of our family.

Given the perception among the men that the area has struggled economically, there is a sense that while many men stay because it is home, they understand why

outsiders would not be attracted to live there without gainful employment. Sam, who has a good job at a manufacturer, explains: “I mean, I love it here, but I don’t know if I would move here. I don’t think I would come here unless it was for a really good job. Like, if I didn’t have the job that I had making the money that I make, um, I would probably go somewhere else.” This sense of how outsiders view the area is not just perception. One of the men is dating a woman from Pittsburgh, and he says she finds life in northwestern Pennsylvania perplexing: “To her, this is absolutely a foreign way of living. Like, we hunt, we heat with wood. Like, to her, we are hillbillies.” Some men liked the area but had career aspirations that they knew would require moving away. Doug, who cooks for a local restaurant, sees the culinary scene as too confining for the types of cooking and experimentation he would like to do: “But, we still you know, we don’t want to stay here forever, and it’s not so much because I like, hate the area or anything, it’s just because I don’t think that I can pursue any kind of career path.” He adds, “Maybe if I was like worked on oil wells or… still did construction, it would be all right. But that’s just not where my life ended up.”

Besides the sluggish economy, the most common complaint was the weather. As Dan said, “Winter times are pretty long and cold here.” Or in Dennis’ words, “The weather up here gets kind of depressing sometimes, you know, the winter—the wintertime.” For those who expressed a desire to move, it was often to leave the cold, not the rural. Most of time, it was idle talk rather than a concrete plan. As Keith said, “Uh, somewhere warmer would maybe be nice.” For most men, the ideal was to move south: Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, even Florida. While a few suggested they might move in the not-to-distant future, others thought they might wait until retirement, like

Sam: “So, I mean, if God is good enough to me to let me live that long and I get to retire, it will be south and I won’t be here very much, that’s for sure.” Even the reasons men want to move testify to their identity as rural men. For example, when asked where he would move, Dennis’ answer centered on hunting: “But I would move to Iowa, because as a resident of Iowa, you get two buck tags a year there, as a resident.”

But despite the area’s economic limitations and cold, snowy winters, there was a sense of pride about being from what some believed was a forgotten part of the state. Todd, who helped expand microbrewing in the area, saw it as a part of his mission to reclaim pride in the area:

> So, the more good breweries and good beer we can make, and my goal is to make Northwestern Pennsylvania, which is always overlooked by every aspect politically, socially… genealogically in all of Pennsylvania, we are the bastards of the corner of the state. We don’t do anything superior, we don’t do anything worthwhile, and there’s all these breweries springing up Pittsburgh and they suck. So, my goal is when people come up to Northwestern Pennsylvania, they can go to any one of these breweries and get good beer.

For other men, northwestern Pennsylvania gets a bad rap as being bereft of wealth. Brent, a contractor, gets to see a different side of the area thanks to his work:

> But um, there are people that have money, there are people that expect quality and expect professionalism. There are people that will pay for quality work. Um, there, there are people out there that will put, you know, $30 to $50,000 kitchens in. There are people, you know, I don’t have to go to a big city to find that and that. And that’s uh, that’s something that I feel people miss. You know, you just look at [his town], well, “I don’t want to work there and nobody has any money.” And I’ve heard that countless times. And you don’t have the options that you do have in a big city for sure, but it’s there. You just have to find it. You don’t have the competition that you have in a big city either.

Not all men are unwilling to leave, but in some cases, it is their wives who are attached to the area. Justin, who traveled when he was in the service, tried to convince his life to live elsewhere to no avail: “So yeah, I was more committed to my wife to

wherever I lived 'cause I'd already lived in enough places, I realized they're basically all the same." William, who has lived in both smaller and larger cities at times in his life, says his wife really appreciates aspects of small-town life: "She likes to have room to breathe and stuff. She can't stand traffic." As discussed in Chapter 3, some men would be interested in living elsewhere but want or need to stay near children. For example, Kyle says he'll likely be in the area for the long-term because the mother of his first child plans to stay, and Kyle would never leave his son.

Rural is more than a geographic designation; it also involves symbolic and cultural elements (Lichter and Brown 2011). There is an extensive literature on the concept of the rural idyll (Bell 2006; Mingay 2017; Shucksmith 2018), which *The Oxford Dictionary of Human Geography* defines as "an idealized, romanticized construct that presents rural areas as happier, healthier, and with fewer problems than urban areas" (Castree, Kitchin, and Rogers 2013). While there can be the tendency to idealize aspects of rural life, there is also the possibility that aspects of rural culture are different than urban. One value that emerged in these interviews was that of frugality and self-sufficiency: there was a clear sense among many men in this study that they took pride in having simple tastes, making do with what they have, and living within their means.[73] Whether or not this rhetoric from the men in this study is actually true to their lives in all cases, the fact that this is part of the narrative of rural life is alone worth examination. To

73 While rugged individualism is part of the American myth (Beard 1931), a particular form of it stems from the American frontier past (Boatright 1941). For Boatright, the myth is the individualism, not the frontier. In his telling, frontier settlers were very much organized and mutually dependent, but their resourcefulness and self-reliance were often confused with individualism by historians. As discussed in Chapter 1, western Pennsylvania was once the colonial frontier, and the founding dates for many of these towns belie when colonists settled this area previously settled by various American Indian groups.

be fair, life in northwestern Pennsylvania has long been dependent upon a connection to the land in the form of gas, oil, and lumber extraction. As seen earlier in the chapter, hunting and fishing are almost ubiquitous leisure pursuits, evidenced in part by the fact that public schools train children in firearms safety and schools close for the first days of deer hunting season.

For men up and down the wage scale, there is a measure of inconspicuous consumption where they seek to live simply and downplay the importance or necessity of luxury goods. Jeff, who makes a good living as a union carpenter, also knows that work is not always guaranteed and has seen colleagues run out of unemployment benefits while waiting for their next jobs, so he tries to live within his means: "I can have fun on the weekends, but not too-much-fun kind of things. There's always that thing that's just like could there be more, could there be something. You just kind of always get used to what you have." Similarly, Wes, who also does relatively well in operations for a brewery, speaks of this simplicity: "We're very simple. I get a birth—I get an ice cream cake for her [his wife] every year for her birthday and—but we don't—we don't buy dumb stuff." Wes is also suspicious of those who violate these rules of inconspicuous consumption: "I see guys that make eight bucks an hour and they have $45,000 vehicles and… and then I find out wow, they just are really, really in debt and debt's—debt's I think our biggest fear." For those with less resources, spending is even more modest, but there is a certain embrace of this forced simplicity. Jared, who once made good money long-haul truck driving but now lives on his disability check and his wife's part-time income, describes their modest goals:

> But I mean like, I mean it, like I know it sounds stupid, but that's actually a big goal for us, for the amount of money we make, you know. You know, I mean, it's

> just like we don't set a goal like to go to the Bahamas, you know. We set a goal, I want a new Laz-E-Boy. Okay, let's shoot for a year or two, you know, and stuff like that, you know.

For some of the men, there is a connection between their contentment and their standard of living growing up. As Cherlin (2018) has suggested, people judge present circumstances less by their contemporaries and more by past generations. William grew up poor, so while he and his family live on less than $2,000 a month, he is grateful he can afford experiences his parents could not:

> Um, I think so because like I appreciate things a lot more and I cherish things a lot more. Like the opportunities to take my kids to go and do stuff like, you know, I've taken my kids to professional football games, professional baseball games. Uh, we've gone and seen hockey, we've gone and seen professional basketball games. Um, we've gotten to meet players and we've gotten to get autographs and pictures taken and um with some pretty famous people. So, I mean it's... and I appreciate that more and I cherish that more 'cause I knew like I didn't... like these are the things like my Dad wanted to do for me but couldn't, you know? And so now I'm getting to do it now for my kids.

In the words of some men, the praise of simplicity can also sound like a critique of consumerism and even capitalism. Greg, who runs a small business, sounds several of these notes in his monologue:

> I mean, you need your essentials and you need your food and water and, and um, a roof over your head. I mean and the air that God already provides for us. You don't need that much, and people just... and they, they buy shit just to lock it up in their house. You know, like, it's senseless. To be honest with you, money is just you need it, but you need it to live because obviously at the end of the year, you gotta pay your taxes for you to be in America or whatever, you know what I mean? So, you need it, but I just think too many people are going to, to be blindsided by the dollar signs and wanting to try and make more. And it starting to ruin our, our big picture of our world.

For some, like Thomas, the simplicity—and his contentment in general—has roots in his religious faith:

> It's not money. It's not income. It's not the government. It's not finances. It's not where you're at. It's love, man. Jesus will show you true love, and true love is the most important thing. You can prevail in any situation. If you're eating snails every day, as long as you got love and Jesus, you'll be fine. Paul was incarcerated and wrote all the New Testament. He might not have been happy, but he had joy in his heart, you know? That was the whole debate like I had at Bible study. To have a joyful heart. Don't sweat the petty. If I could give myself advice, that would be it. I've done so many things out of anger in my life, and out of raw emotion out of things that were stupid. When you live past that season, and you look back, it wasn't even a big deal. You were stressing about that, dude? Honestly, just enjoy the time you have and keep Jesus number one. 'Cause if I would of did that, I would be a lot further ahead in my life in a lot of areas than I am now. I wouldn't have a lot of the blessings that I have now either. Through suffering you gain. Nobody gains anything without suffering. I mean it's a catch twenty-two, you know what I mean? A testimony of blood and lamb. That's where it's at. So, without suffering... I don't know. I would have to say love. Jesus Christ. Keep him number one. That's would I have to say. Absolutely.

Rooted in Whiteness

Concern with social cohesion, especially in a rapidly changing world, goes back to the earliest days of sociology. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, first published in 1893, Durkheim (2014) argued that it is the task of society to "put a stop to… anomie, and to find ways of harmonious co-operation between those organs that clash discordantly together" (340). He contrasted two types of social solidarity: mechanical solidarity, or solidarity by similarities, and organic solidarity, or the solidarity arising from the division of labor. Similarly, Tönnies (2017) wrote in 1887 of the differences between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), in which social ties can be contrasted as personal (*Gemeinschaft*) or impersonal (*Gesellschaft*). Historically, social theorists have identified rural place as being more characteristic of mechanical

solidarity, *Gemeinschaft,* and other descriptions that emphasize close, in-person, personal ties grounded in similarities (for a brief review, see Albrecht and Albrecht 1996).[74]

At least in northwestern Pennsylvania, which is predominantly white, one unspoken aspect of rural identity and solidarity is whiteness. The long-standing conflation of rurality and whiteness has been maintained by racially-exclusive constructions of rural living (Holloway 2007), whether in the form of the rural idyll discussed earlier or what is sometimes called rural white imaginaries, meaning "the romanticized pure white rural of colonial history" (Cairns 2013).[75] When rural people describe rural place as friendly and tight-knit, this is often predicated on these racially-exclusive understandings of rural place. In places where the sense of community has been challenged by the presence of black or brown bodies, scholars have documented hostility of the white majority and the intensive boundary work by the minority groups to fit into existing conceptions of the rural white imaginary. In rural Australia, Edgeworth (2015) finds that discourses of rural whiteness facilitate exclusion of resettled refugees where black bodies are cast as "out of place". And recent work among Latino immigrants in rural Arkansas finds that the newcomers seek to fit in through hard work and neighborliness, explicitly setting themselves in contrast to "white trash" residents (Hallett 2012), thus playing on class cleavages. Further, both Silva (2013) and Cherlin (2014) write in detail about the racial barriers that remain within the working class, including the deep-seated and long-running animosity of white workers toward African Americans.

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74 Albrecht and Albrecht (1996) also discuss the convergence of many rural-urban indicators over time, perhaps diminishing the salience of this binary. In particular, they argue that many of these differences previously seen as rural/urban are better understood as farm/non-farm.
75 Although Cairns is writing about Canada, there is application to the United States and other white, colonial places.

Respondents in this study are ninety-five percent white, which is roughly in line with the demographics of the area. Men were not asked explicitly about race and few volunteered thoughts on the topic, so there is little that is explicit to glean from the interviews. Because northwestern Pennsylvania is a predominantly white space, it is safe to assume that at least some of the racially-exclusionary tactics present in other rural, white places are present there. I did not ask about racial attitudes of the men in this study, but as a baseline, research around the 2016 election shows while most white, working-class people are conservative on a range of issues, there is small group of white, working-class liberals and a much larger group of white, working-class moderates—about 35 percent of the white, working-class total—who display more racial openness than white, working-class conservatives (Molyneux 2017). My experience in the field and deep connections to the area attest that individuals in this area are heterogeneous in their racial attitudes. However, regardless of the views of individuals, the persistence of pervasive yet subtle modern manifestations of racism still pervade American society (Bonilla-Silva 2006; DiAngelo 2018), rural and urban alike. The United States is what Robert Chang (2017) calls a racial state, which he defines as a nation that "has allocated rights, duties, privileges, and material wealth based on race" (4). Even in the absence of much data from the interviews about race, it is safe to assume the existence of complex, racialized attitudes and social structures.

Concern about the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in northwestern Pennsylvania was conspicuously absent in the interviews. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, in one of the rare cases in which "diversity" was raised in an interview, Nick equated it with "craziness" in the context of discussing city life:

> I said, it's not even Pittsburgh. I said it's a whole new ballgame because those are the things that I never knew because I almost feel sheltered growing up in this town. There's not enough diversity in this town that would show you remotely close to what's out there in this world…. Craziness can be out there, and you have absolutely no idea.

But Zach, who has mixed-race children, sees the lack of diversity through the eyes of his children. He says he would move to find a place with more diversity: "There's not enough diversity, and with three of our kids being mixed race, it's… it would be nice to have them in a community where they felt a little more welcomed, I guess." He continues:

> … you could tell how awkward it was for them to be out in the community because everywhere they went it was just white people, and you would go to Walmart and people would be staring at you, and yeah, you really get a sense of what they go through so. If we had the opportunity to expose them to more diverse communities, we probably would.

Rooted in Family

Finally, many of these men are rooted in family life. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, about one-quarter of the men in this study are single, have never been married, and have no children; almost one-third have traditional family structure, meaning the men are either married and childless or married with children born within the marriage; and the remaining forty percent are in complex families. Cherlin (2014) has documented the fall of the working-class family from 1975-2010, a time in which the family formation patterns of the college-educated diverged from those with less than a college degree. The college-educated marry, have children after marriage, and are unlikely to divorce; those with less than a college degree also delay marriage, but they increasingly have children before marriage, often in cohabiting unions that are fragile. Claiming that men in this

study are rooted in family life is not a refutation of these broader trends, and the fact remains that the modal family structure in this study is nontraditional. Yet through the interviews and time spent with these men, it is clear that family matters, even when men sometimes fail in their responsibilities, which is in line with other treatments of low-income fathers (Edin and Nelson 2013). Less surprising that family matters to these working-class men is the way in which they find identity in their roles and husbands and fathers, which is in contrast to the picture of earlier generations of more austere breadwinning men who often provided financially but not emotionally. In general, there is a salience of partnerships, children, and marriage among the men in this study that stands out from other samples of working-class men (see Edin et al. 2019).

Among the men who are single, never married, and with no children, they are navigating employment precarity on their own. Only two of the sixteen men in this category have good jobs (see Chapter 4), and both men are outliers in the sense they are still single and childless in their 40s. Most of the men in this group are precariously employed in low-wage work, and many have had trouble maintaining labor force attachment. Some of the men are under 25 and still finding their ways in the world, but many are in their late twenties and even thirties and still having trouble finding their footing. It could be the case that the lack of employment security and the low wages among this group makes them less attractive to potential partners; none of these men are cohabiting, and only three of the sixteen were dating at the time of the interview. Some of these men have generative pursuits, like the ones discussed earlier, but a number of them do not. As a group, these men have tenuous attachments to work, family, and religion, making them most like those profiled in other recent work about working-class men

(Edin et al. 2019). There is reason to be concerned about the outcomes of these men, although as a note of caution, other men in the sample looked similarly adrift in their twenties and thirties only to find their employment and relational footing in their thirties or beyond. This tendency of men needing family to spur them vocationally is consistent with other treatments of family formation among low-income populations (Edin and Kefalas 2007).

Because secure work is elusive for most men, forming families is not a "cure" for labor market precarity. For those in marriages and partnerships, there is most often a household-level livelihood strategy, marking a return to a previous mode of family life that predates the male breadwinner model (Cherlin 2014) and consistent with the movement of many women into the labor force during the last half of the twentieth century. Of the forty men in the study currently with a partner or spouse, thirty-one of those women are working full- or part-time. Two of the forty partners or spouses receive SSDI, which brings resources into the household in a different way. Only seven of the forty partners are not working, and of those, two are unemployed but looking for work. In almost all cases of men with working partners, the man makes more or equivalent to their partners, although it is not uncommon for men to be out of work and have their spouse or partner be the sole breadwinner for a time. As discussed in Chapter 2, most spells of nonparticipation are not permanent, so men usually resume earning at some point.

In a few cases, remnants of the male breadwinner model remain in form, but the men are often careful to state that it is the choice of the wife not to work, not something imposed by him. Jacob makes a comfortable living in law enforcement, which has

allowed his wife to be home for the kids and pursue her hobbies. He describes this as the preferred arrangement between them:

> No, my wife is an at-home mom. This was an agreement we made years ago. She wanted to be an at-home mom, and I said, "Well, if I can get a good enough job where you live comfortable", and I have no problem with that. Um, because then, every day when the girls come home, they're always, there's always one of us there. Now me, oh wait a minute, let me change that, her, not me, is into farming, I guess, is the word I want to say. Whenever I say farmer, I think of cows and doing, um, sewing oats and out in the fields, no no no, we have a farm, this is her, not me. I just look at her pay and I have to pay for it all, but we have a, we have over a hundred animals, or she does; I have one cat. Um, yeah, she grew, she was, she always grew up with horses and chickens and that, so we've got horses, chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, sheep, rabbits, cats, dog, fish. She just got peacocks. Um, she's trying to get a license for a zebra now. Yeah, like I said, I just a person who live there. I have a cat. We have eight cats.

But what counts as enough income to allow a partner or wife to stay home varies. William, who brings in a little under $2,000 a month from disability and a pension, and his wife determined that he brings in enough to allow his wife to stay home:

> She used to work. She was a cook down at the VFW, but she left that position. Um, and she just really just realized that, you know, she doesn't need to. So, it was getting to be more stress and more politics and BS than she wanted to put up with, so she was like, "if I don't have to put up with it, I'm not gonna." And so, since she left that position that opened me up to go to school so.

His wife staying home with the kids, which William had been doing, allowed him to use his GI Bill to pursue his college degree.

While arrangements like William's do not represent a total breakdown of traditional gender roles around tasks like caregiving, there is a sense that the rigidity of certain roles has eroded. Ryan and his partner capture this negotiation of caregiving roles around who in the relationship has work at the moment. Ryan moved among several low-wage jobs after he dropped out of high school. After working in a factory and then in manual labor, he moved on to telemarketing but was fired for swearing on a call. By this

point, he was living with his girlfriend, who was expecting their first child. He got a job that required some local travel, but he decided he would rather be home:

> After having a daughter, I'm like, "You know, I really need a job, but this is kinda neat, you know. I'm not gonna go back to it. I wanna, you know, spend two weeks to a month with my daughter anyways, growing up, you know. [The travel job] wasn't a job for somebody who just had a kid anyways, being on the road a week at a time. So, I didn't work there for a while…

During this stretch of nonparticipation, Ryan's girlfriend worked nights at a local restaurant, and he helped with his daughter: "With her working and I wasn't working, we had somebody to sit with the kids, you know, the house stayed clean." Ryan would sometimes take day labor, depending on the weather. This combination of his girlfriend's work and his piecework made things manageable: "So, I mean, things worked. We got by. We were never rich." Christian had a stretch of several years where he used his GI Bill to go back to school and care for the kids while hi wife had a good job, and George left the labor force for about a year to care for his daughters while his wife was the primary earner.

While it might be expected that men and their partners would have to negotiate roles in response to a precarious labor market, men in this study also express how much they embrace their roles as husbands and fathers in a way that exposes an emotional vulnerability foreign to earlier generations of working-class men. Some men talked about ways they take on household tasks for their partners or wives. Justin, whose wife works a demanding job, has learned one way he can support her is to make dinner and give her space after work. He makes dinner with the help of his six-year old daughter, which also offers bonding time with her:

> So, we'll come home, we'll make dinner so that my wife doesn't have to think when she gets home cause she's been dealing with angry people all day on both

> sides, so when she gets home, it's kind of like her safe place, you know. She isn't always the most polite when she gets home, but she's dealing with a lot, so you know, you kind of grow to accept that. So, I just try to make sure she doesn't have to do much when she gets home if I can help it.

Similarly, Jared, who is on disability but whose wife works, has taken over all the cooking duties, which is not a bad deal for her since he has culinary training. Many men mentioned how they do some household tasks. Kyle, for example, who works part-time at a grocery store, has charge of his infant son in the afternoon after he gets off work. He speaks in mundane terms of the daily routine, which includes his caring for his son and making dinner, and doing the evening routine: "Um, usually come home, take the babysitter back to her house, uh, come back, usually he's ready for a nap around then, so I lay my son down for a nap. I'll play a couple rounds of video games or something, um, wake him up, feed him lunch, make dinner, then go for a walk, and then you know, it's bath time, bed time." I did not ask men their ideal arrangements for work and home life, but recent work suggests that men and woman across the education and income levels prefer egalitarian arrangements but often find themselves lapsing into traditional roles under the constraints of real life (Pedulla and Thébaud 2015; Yavorsky, Dush, and Schoppe-Sullivan 2015). Still, men have increased their contributions to care work and housework (Bianchi 2011), although they do less than they think (Pew Research Center 2015). In some respects, the men in this study conform to these trends: gender roles have not flipped, but men are doing more than past generations.

Perhaps the biggest change from past generations of working-class husbands and fathers is the way these men measure their success and happiness according to how they perform in these roles. Nick, profiled at the start of this chapter, says that he has lived a good life, and his ultimate concern is for his daughter, although he speaks in the

collective about “our kids”: “Like I said, I worry about our kids. That’s the biggest thing to me. Um, I don’t worry about getting retirement or like that. I’m not old by any means, but I’ve lived pretty good, many years and having my fun. I want to make sure that my daughter...right there.”

Thomas, who is divorced and remarried and has joint custody of his three kids from his first marriage, views his happiness, not according to his earnings, but his relationships. He sums up the ways in which many of these men have pivoted from viewing success in monetary or material terms to relational:

> Like I said, it’s all that happiness category. What is happiness to me? I don’t know, man. I just want my kids to be happy. I want to give them everything I possibly can. As long as they’re happy, I’m happy. You know what I mean? Make my wife happy. Be the husband I’m supposed to be and the father I’m supposed to be. Whatever that entails.

Unwitting Resistance?

Willis' (1981) classic work on lives of working-class boys in England depicts white working-class youth as political actors, consciously resisting authority, even though it meant socially reproducing their working-class station in life. The picture of men in this study is one of contentment, not resistance.[76] However, there is a sense in which the men in this study might be unwitting resistors by virtue of the way they have re-centered the role of formal work as a source of meaning an identity. Not only does the presence of vocational selves make these men different from men in other studies of the working class, it also makes them different from their more-educated, more-affluent peers, for

76 More about these men’s political views will be explored in Chapter 6.

whom workism (Thompson 2019) and burnout (Petersen 2019) are characteristic. In an important sense, the men in this study have done what the economist John Maynard Keynes predicted for his grandchildren in 1930 (Keynes 2010) and what contemporary observers have suggested would be good medicine for our over-worked culture (Thompson 2019): they have made work less central to their lives.

Conclusion

In a recent article, Halpin and Smith (2017) introduce the concept of *employment management work* (EMW), which they define as "a generic, lifelong project in which most adults (and many youth) engage—to varying degree, intensity, autonomy, depth, and breadth, and with varying resources—to manage their employment experiences" (340). This theoretical concept is meant to capture the real-world calculations and trade-offs made by workers—from white-collar managers to migrant workers—as they navigate the labor market. They suggest that while EMW is not new, it might be more frequent and fraught in an employment landscape characterized by precarity, turnover, layoffs, and churn (Kalleberg 2018).

In a sense, this chapter explores EMW among working-class men in rural Pennsylvania, particularly the evolution of working-class identity among men in the face of growing labor market precarity. First, I find that the nature of these men's jobs shapes their ability to think about and plan for the future. For the minority of men in secure positions, particularly those with jobs that offer a clear retirement timeline, they think of the future in those terms. Moreover, some men even forego opportunities for promotion at work in favor of maintaining job security, a demonstration that job security, which is

elusive, is more prized by some than prestige or even income. But for the majority of men who do not have secure work, they have difficulty thinking and planning for the future, which reflects the insecure nature of their work. In this sense, thinking about the future is a luxury these men are not afforded.

One way that most men in this study have responded to growing job insecurity is that they ask both *more* and *less* of work than working-class men profiled in other sociological literature. They ask *more* in the sense that men care about the nature of their work and are less willing to countenance work that is not personally fulfilling or at least tolerable, especially when it does not pay well enough to justify the conditions. But men also ask *less* of work in the sense that at least some men have deemphasized the role of work in their identities. Men still value work, but they also find meaning in other spheres like family, church, friendship, and hobbies. Rather than identity being centered around "the disciplined self" (Lamont 2000), I find that men have *vocational selves* (Edin et al. 2019), where their truest identities come from non-work pursuits. Two of the few times during my interviews where men used their phones to show me pictures were instances of men showing me their hobbies: Steve showed me pictures of the dirt-track race cars he builds (an activity he does with his oldest son), and Mark showed me pictures of him fighting fires as part of a volunteer fire department.

Also in contrast to other treatments of the working class, in which men are angry (Silva 2013) and rootless (Cherlin 2014), the men in this study display a high degree of contentment with their situations, which I attribute to a set of subcultural beliefs and practices rooted in rural place and rural masculinity. Connection to rural place is especially salient for these men, and many evince a masculinity rooted in working with

one's hands, being outdoors, and earning your beer at the end of the day. One unspoken aspect of this rural rootedness is its whiteness, which offers an unspoken degree of social solidarity under the guise of friendliness and community.

In sum, as the traditional markers of adulthood have moved out of reach of many in the working class (Silva 2013), this study shows that not all men have responded similarly, which contributes to deeper understanding of the EMW as conducted by different workers in different social, familial, and geographic settings. As Halpin and Smith (2017) write, the growing precarity of work "… gives greater urgency to the importance of studying how human beings—hoping and needing to support themselves and others and aspiring to a modicum of dignity and self-worth in their laboring activities—strive to act as agents and to exert some degree of control over these outcomes" (370).

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In many ways, working-class men in rural America are doing better than popular depictions of rural America suggest. Among the men in this study, most are attached to the labor force most of the time. Further, almost all men make above the minimum wage, and about one-third have "good" jobs that pay at least $15 an hour, in some cases much more. The men in this study also do more than people think to improve their labor market prospects, including seeking additional education and training, moving for work, or taking jobs that require travel. Many men have cultivated vocational selves, and in general, men are content, a function at least in part of being rooted in rural place and, in many cases, to their families. Yet these men also face many challenges: most men move in and out of work, often spending extended periods unemployed or even out of the labor force. Some men are trapped in low-wage work, and many more have wages that are "stuck" at a level that is barely enough to raise them or their families out of poverty. Most men lack work that provides hope of future security, any clear ladders of upward mobility, or personal meaning and identity. Further, many men have jobs that are physically demanding, and some men have mental or physical health challenges severe enough that they have qualified for disability benefits. Complex family structures that include strained relationships with partners and children are common. And some men, especially younger, single men, have tenuous attachments to work and family. What does this mean for assessing the state of working-class men in rural America today?

In this chapter, I conclude this dissertation by first exploring what might be learned from these men as it pertains to the current political moment. It is difficult to mention the "white working class" in 2019 without acknowledging that Donald Trump

was elected President of the United States thanks in part to a wave of white, working-class support (Cohn 2017). Having started the fieldwork for this project the summer before the 2016 election, I had the opportunity to ask some of these men about their 2016 votes, and the picture that emerged is more complex than many analyses of the 2016 election allow. Rather than finding full-throated support for Trump, I find that many men were conflicted about their votes and only reluctantly chose Trump because of an even deeper suspicion of Hilary Clinton as the status quo option (Francis 2018). Yet one dominant picture of men like the ones in the study is that they are angry (Kimmel 2017; Sexton 2017), so I explore how the men in this study express and channel their political and economic grievances to the degree they have them. While there is hope among some on the left that these men can be mobilized on the grounds of economic populism, I find that these men cling to a political populism that distrusts government more than economic elites. This is in keeping with Arlie Hochschild's (2016) recent work among the Tea Party in Louisiana where she uncovers a "deep story" among her respondents that sees government as the problem and not the solution. Starting with Hochschild and adding Coleman (1982), I offer a theoretical way forward from our current political moment that takes seriously the deepest commitments of both the conservative right and the liberal left. I conclude with a summary of this dissertation, the contributions this dissertation makes to knowledge, and suggestions for next steps in research about the working class in rural America.

Him, Not Her[77]

In the mid-1980s, Lois Weis (1990) studied white, working-class identity formation in a northwestern American city. She anticipated that white, working-class men—who had poor job prospects and a diminished labor movement with which to connect—would attach to the New Right's platform of sexism and racism. Thirty years later, Donald Trump played on sentiments of the white working class as victims of globalization (Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017) and won the presidency on a wave of white, working-class support (Cohn 2017). Trump's success in white, working-class places is striking: of the 660 counties in America that are at least 85% white with below median incomes (places predominantly in the upper Rockies, Midwest, and Appalachia), Clinton won just two (Gest 2017). Her husband, by contrast, won nearly half of such counties just twenty years earlier. Yet while there is evidence of increased white working-class turnout in key states in the 2016 election (Morgan and Lee 2018), the reasons behind this "Trump bump" are debated. The white working class have variously been depicted as economically dislocated (Sides and Tesler 2016); dismayed at their diminished fortunes relative to previous generations (Cherlin 2016; Gest 2016); resentful of urban elites (Cramer 2016); concerned about the end of white Christian America (Jones 2016) and the crumbling of the racial hierarchy (Bouie 2016); and grieved at the prospect of minority advancement (Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016; Tesler 2016).

77 Results in this section have previously appeared in "Him, Not Her: Why Working-class White Men Reluctant about Trump Still Made Him President of the United States" (Francis 2018).

How do the men in this study fit into this narrative, especially given their relative contentment? The beginning of my fieldwork in the summer of 2016 coincided with the national party conventions and the lead up to the 2016 election. Policy and politics were not the focus of this study, and men were screened into the study based on age and working-class status, not anything related to politics or voting behavior. Yet little did I know at the outset of this project that Mr. Trump would go from campaign curiosity to Commander-in-Chief. When I returned to the field in January and March of 2017, I added questions about the election for my new respondents and re-contacted subjects from the summer to also ask them who they voted for and why. The results, published in 2018 (Francis 2018), tell a more complex story than media narratives of white rage. A theme among the interviews was the reluctance about Trump. While some men appreciated Trump's boldness, most also saw him as unpredictable and were wide-eyed about the risks Trump posed. Dustin thought Trump "could be a disaster." Greg, said Trump "might not be the best president," adding that "he, he freaks me out a little bit… ." Zach described Trump as "a showman and celebrity and an antagonizer more than a bringer of peace." William, a veteran, simply called Trump unqualified. And Jacob, a law enforcement officer, wished Trump weren't the nominee. Yet despite the stated reluctance, most who voted still chose Trump, with Clinton and Johnson garnering minimal support. Why the votes for Trump?

The answer I found was simple: in short, for them, Clinton was worse. Clinton, despite being the first female nominee of a major political party, was seen by these men as an entrenched politician and the status quo option. But more than that, these men did not like or trust her. For some, it had a basis in her policies or politics. Several men,

especially veterans, were troubled by the email server situation, and a few brought up other policy matters, such as one veteran who was concerned about military funding. Yet for many of the men, their critiques of her veered—whether subtly or sometimes more overtly—into sexism. Of course, it is not sexist to criticize a female candidate, and I want to be careful to be fair to these men's stated reasons for not considering Clinton. Yet it was hard to escape the outsized sense of distrust of her that seemed to go beyond her policies and politics. Critiques went from the understated, like "I just didn't believe her," to the overt: "I don't like how she looks, acts in public: her persona."

While some men in this group would have never considered any Democrat, Clinton or otherwise, many of these men had voted for Obama or other Democrats in the past and were genuinely conflicted about their vote. I identified four types of voters among my cases: first timers, those who had never previously voted but who did so to support Trump; Republican base voters, those who had varied thoughts about Trump but were unlikely to have supported any Democratic candidate, Clinton or otherwise; conflicted voters—about half of likely voters—who struggled with the voting decision but ultimately broke mostly for Trump because of their dislike of Clinton; and nonvoters, many of whom had opinions about the election and the candidates, but who either never considered voting or did not follow through for a variety of reasons.

In the end, I think the overriding message from these men was clear: anyone but Clinton, even Trump. It was a choice, as one Trump voter told me, "between a douche and a turd sandwich." While some men resolved this dilemma by not voting or voting for a third-party candidate, most ultimately held their nose and chose Trump as the lesser of two evils. This is not to say Trump had no appeal: the men who were motivated enough

to vote for the first time in support of Trump clearly liked Trump's line on things like trade and immigration, although even those men acknowledged that Trump was a bit of a wild card who might not work out. Trump's main appeal seemed to be his status as a political outsider, and men seemed to take the approach that trying something unconventional was worth it, especially if the alternative was a conventional politician. As law enforcement officer Sean said, "I felt like, if Hillary was gonna be in there, nothing was gonna change… somebody that was non-politician should be given an opportunity. I wish it wasn't Donald Trump, but he was the only one there." Had there been a Democratic nominee even remotely acceptable in the eyes of these men, some nonvoters would have voted, some third-party voters would have supported the Democrat, and several of the Trump voters would have defected. In fact, many of the Trump voters indicated they would have voted for Sanders or at least considered doing so. If nothing else, these findings cast some doubt on explanations for Trump's large margins among working-class white men that rely primarily on Trump's appeal, whether his personality or his policies, without much consideration for his opponent. While the move of the white working-class to the Republican Party has been on-going for decades, perhaps some of Trump's margin among the white working-class was due to Clinton's presence, not attraction to Trump.

Which Populism?

A prominent depiction of the working class, especially in the wake of the election of Trump, is one of angry white men (Kimmel 2017; Sexton 2017). Yet given the fact that many men in this study did not vote at all or were reluctant in their support for

Trump, an avenue opens for a different discussion about the political proclivities and fortunes of the white, working class. Several men in this study said explicitly they would have voted for Bernie Sanders had he been the nominee, which some might construe as support for Sanders' message of economic populism. Indeed, given the levels of economic precarity and wage stagnation experienced by many of these men, one might expect to find more agitation for change. For Silva's (2013) working-class respondents, instead of funneling their grievance outward, they turn inward to take control of the one thing they can, namely their own psychological selves.

How do the men in this study respond? As explored in Chapter 5, these men display a degree of contentment and acceptance of their circumstances not present in other recent treatments of the working class, but this is not mutually exclusive with grievance or political engagement. While men have learned to make do—in part out of a rugged individualism born of the "frontier" experience of rural place—they were not shy about offering criticism of their jobs, employers, or the economy. Many have faced unkind, unethical, and even illegal treatment at work. How do men interpret and channel these grievances?

For the most part, men in this study did not connect their employment situations to a broader critique of prevailing economic or political systems. However, their political views often emerged in other portions of the interview, especially when I asked them what advice they would give to our political leaders. Some men took a humble approach to that question, suggesting they would not know what to say. Dan, a general laborer, said as much: "Oh geez, I don't know what it would be, I mean, I'm not an economist or anything like that. I don't know what solutions, or what you could do to improve the

situation at all." He mused that we could "… start investing in, uh, battery powered cars. [Laughs] And making lithium batteries, I guess. I don't know." Other men were more opinionated. Justin, for example, lit up when asked what advice he would give to our elected leaders:

> Oh, my goodness. What I would actually just ask any of them to do is just to back off. Stop making laws. Just stop making laws. We actually seem to judge the effectiveness of a leader by how many new laws they created and never just the fact that all these frivolous laws are the stinking problem. They really are. You can try to make another law to improve someone's life, when in reality—if you just stop criminalizing everything they do—then their quality of life is already improved.

Justin's comments capture the libertarian ethos that characterizes the views of many men in the study. While men would like higher wages, they also want the government to take less in taxes—from them and from businesses. The government is rarely seen in a positive light, and to the degree men mentioned the government, it concerned ways the government had intruded on valued aspects of their lives or the economy: through gun control; through regulations on extractive industries and small businesses; through taxes that are too high; and even by removing prayer from schools. Most men rhetorically supported programs to help the poor, especially women and children, but there was also a sense that "welfare" was being taken advantage of and more people needed to work. Some men's families had used some safety net programs at times, but men generally resisted receiving government assistance out of a sense of pride and self-reliance, at least when it came in the form of "welfare" programs.[78] Steve, who is

78 As Sherman's (2009) work shows, there is a hierarchy of the moral acceptability of low-income and government programs in rural places. "Welfare" is at the bottom, which seems true among these men, although so few people actually receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in the year after welfare reform (Edin and Shaefer 2015). The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is more

currently unemployed and whose wife receives disability benefits, framed his support for Trump around this issue: "'Cause he's [Trump's] talking about a lot of these people that live off of welfare and stuff like that, he's going to give them the boot and tell them they've got to go to work." However, the libertarian bent among many of these men sometimes led them to positions that transgress Republican Party orthodoxy, such as questioning American military involvements. In fact, the most often cited policy suggestions among these men was the legalization of marijuana.[79]

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common among these men and their families, although it is also stigmatized. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is more tolerated. The receipt of disability benefits is an interesting case: there is suspicion among some men about the deservingness of some who receive it, but because it requires a work history, it is more acceptable in general than other types of assistance. As discussed in Chapter 2, unemployment insurance—as an earned benefit—is not seen in the same category as these other programs and often plays an integral role in the social safety net for these men.

79 Although a full accounting of these men's views on policy is beyond the scope this chapter, the men had a collection of views that would not conform neatly to the policy positions of the political right or left. This "hodge-podge" of ideas is exemplified by this exchange with Mark, who works second shift at a factory:

Mark:	Make all the rich people pay higher taxes, and poor people pay less taxes.
Interviewer:	Yeah?
Mark:	And people that don't have a job, would be lookin' for a job because they won't be getting' no government support.
Interviewer:	Yeah. Sounds pretty straight forward.
Mark:	I'd give 'em medical, but that's all they could get.
Interviewer:	Okay. Medical, no cash.
Mark:	There's no cash, there's no food stamps, there's none of that.
Interviewer:	Yeah. What if someone wasn't able to work?
Mark:	There's always work out there.

If there was anger expressed in the context of discussing policy or politics, it was directed at the political system. Jacob, who works in law enforcement and is a member of a public sector union, still directs his anger at "government":

> I just don't like Washington at all. I work for the government, but I don't like the government at all. I'm not an... I'm not an anarchist, but you can look at it if you follow politics at all, it just isn't what it was 50 years ago. It's more of a very corrupt, self-centered... well, how can you take this amount of money here, put it into our pocket but when things aren't getting done, blame the middle class and say it's something that they have done is why this money is being wasted, but yet our pensions are going to be stuffed in our own pockets, we'll be taken care of. It's corrupt.

Brad, a recovered opioid addict who receives disability from a back injury at work, seethes at the political establishment. Asked why he did not vote in 2016, he replied:

> 'Cause I hate politics. It's just... if you have enough money you can become president and that is true. Doesn't matter how many bad things you do, you are just going to become president. And that's not how America used to be. I mean, Richard Nixon gets impeached for hiding things, and now look at the people who are running for president, become president.

How does this libertarian ethos and distrust of government square with the near-support among many of these men for Sanders in 2016? To understand this apparent incongruity, one helpful distinction is between what Guy Molyneux (2017) calls economic and political populism. According to Molyneux, Sanders and Elizabeth Warren represent an economic populism in which "the bad guys are the wealthy, corporations, and CEOs—with a special place in hell reserved for Wall Street." While Trump taps into some of the same grievances among the working class as Sanders and Warren, Trump has a fundamentally different diagnosis of the root of the problem: it is a "*failure of government*" (emphasis his) in which people have been betrayed by political elites. Molyneux suggests that while most debate about the election of Trump has been concerned with weighing the relative contributions of economic despair and racial

resentment among the white, working class, the most underappreciated aspect of Trump's victory is a distrust of government that has been decades in the making. This is in line with the evidence from the men in this study, who distrust government more than corporations. To the degree these men considered Sanders, it was as an outsider candidate and alternative to Trump, not as one who precisely articulated their preferred strain of populism.

But what about the role of unions in tethering the working classes to the Democratic Party (Rosenfeld 2014)? While private sector union saturation is in the single digits, some men in this study still have the types of unionized, blue-collar work that could direct their political affections and keep them attached to the Democratic Party. Yet as we saw with Jacob above, the men in this study do not naturally connect their union membership with a loyalty to the Democratic Party. In general, men in this study have mixed feelings about unions, even for men who benefit from union wages, benefits, and protections. Jacob, himself a member of a public sector union, says that Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's assault on public-sector unions got him into politics: "...it was actually Scott Walker that got me watching politics. I never cared about it. Now I'm so obsessed to it." But rather than his "obsession" translating into Democratic loyalty, he is disgusted with the whole political system and thinks the best thing an elected official can do is steer clear of both parties:

> My advice... no matter what the topic was, um, don't listen to a Democrat or a Republican. Don't, um, don't because they're looking at... their answers are always gonna be for what's best for their, uh, their interest and stuff like that. Um, he needs to actually talk to people that are not politicians. Just start bouncing ideas and opinions off of other people than just Democrats or Republicans. Get different views.

Jeff, a union carpenter, sounds very similar notes when he reflects on the state of the economy and his own union. He says it is the government and welfare spending that is "pulverizing" the middle class, not corporations: "I feel like the middle class is getting pulverized by the government, um, by the poverty level class." He evinces a deep suspicion of those receiving government assistance:

> So, I mean, it's just like there are people that can get free cell phones, they can get free food, they can get just about anything. I read something, I don't know how true it is, but sometimes people that work the system can make out better than the people that actually work and support the system. When you add up all the benefits, all the housing and all this and all that. It's enough to piss you off 'cause it's just like sometimes I feel like I can barely, if I get a hospital bill, it's just like oh, or something that I know I need to pay or it will affect my credit or whatever. I just feel like it's almost hard enough to keep your head above the water.

While Jeff is concerned that Pennsylvania may soon become a Right-to-Work state, he also has little faith in the integrity of his union for reasons that he leaves unclear:

> They want to make, um, PA a Ready-to-Work state. If that goes into effect, then I'm going to be working with other people that—and be making half of what I make now maybe, I mean, maybe not. But, you know, the whole union idea, even politics inside the union, like they used to stand for good things, but I just don't know how they can be so un-things you know. I guess where there's power, there's corruption.

Seth, who is unionized and works for a manufacturer, speaks more warmly about his union than Jeff. Seth spoke at some length about the most recent contract negotiations, and he showed a fluency with the workings of his union and his many benefits derived from his membership:

> If my union dues went up, it would not bother me because of the security that I have. You know, I'm gonna have, for employee, next year will be my seventh full year, I'm gonna have three full weeks paid vacation, five sick days, all the benefits that I have. Like insurance for a single guy is six bucks a week. Guys with a family, it's like 19. So, they take really, really good care of us, so.

But Seth also speaks to the fact that not all unions are created equal. He says he knows of some men who would like to vote out their unions:

> Well, I got some other buddies that work for some union shops, and they would like to vote it out because they don't think that they're getting the short end of the stick. But it all depends on your bargaining unit and what deal you cut, this and that, just like anything, you know.

Sean, who works in law enforcement, is part of a workplace that made that very decision. In fact, he was the union representative for a time, and in his experience with negotiations, he found the union unconcerned about the needs of his men and ineffective:

> And, uh, it was a struggle. Yeah, they, the union was weak. Um, we'd go to negotiations and, um, we'd be six months in the negotiations and, uh, the union, um, lady would say, "What do you guys do again?" And I'm like, "Wait, what do you mean, 'what do we do again?'" You know, just, she just wanted the contract signed. And I'm like, "Listen, no. I'm, you know, I'm here for half of our office," you know. I'm tryin' to fight wages, or fight that we have, and it wasn't ridiculous wages, it was just, like, we have a dangerous job.

Although Sean talked about progress won in negotiations over time, he said that eventually they decided the union was not worth it: "So, you know, it came a long way, but then, um, the union was just, like, you know, they were suckin' the money out of each pay, and nothing was goin' on. Nothing was getting' any better. So, the, the deputies on their own decided we, we want out." Sean admits that being part of the union had benefits ("… it does have its benefits to, to wages and, and equipment and, you know, other benefits and stuff"), but he also is skeptical of the role of unions in protecting jobs. Overall, he sees unions as a mixed bag:

> … I guess my, my opinion about a union is, um, it has its goods and bads, but my opinion is, if you're worried, it shouldn't be about, you shouldn't be worried about, "Well, they'll protect me if I get fired," or, well, you shouldn't worry about that. Just come to work and do your job and work your best. You shouldn't need somebody to protect ya, nobody's gonna let you go if you're doin' what you're supposed to. My opinion.

Sean isn't the only man in the study to be part of a union that is judged as ineffectual. Phil, the male nurse who is part of a union, equivocates on the value of his union: "Pros and cons to it." Although Phil has worked at the hospital for seven years, he knew very little about his union until the latest collective bargaining agreement, which some workers found lacking:

> Um, no one ever really educated me on why or what the union really does. Um, and they just came out with a new collective bargaining agreement like in the past month or two, and a lot of us were not really big fans of, like, they raised our health insurance deductibles a lot and we got, um, like every department—because every position, not just nursing, is union, like dietary's union, housekeeping's union, maintenance is union—it's all the same union. Um, so like, they got two percent pay increase across the board, which is basically cost of living increase. Um, and then nursing an additional two percent on top of that. Nobody else did, but nursing did, so that was kind of good for me. Um, but they really jacked up our deductible, so by the time you factor that in, like if me and my family, we meet our deductible this year, probably didn't really get that much of a raise.

One side effect of the dissatisfaction with the new contract was increased involvement by Phil and many others:

> Um, so they are just things in the most recent CBA—collective bargaining agreement—that a lot of us didn't like, so um, they just had a union meeting yesterday and a bunch of us went. There were like thirty-six people there, and the union board were like, "Usually it's just like three of us and no one really shows up."

The meeting gave Phil and others the chance to ask questions. One unintended consequence of the new CBA might be a reinvigoration of the union:

> So there hasn't been a lot of communication between the union and us as union members. I was kind of asking them, like I said, "I've been here seven years, and no one's ever invited me to a meeting." I know that's kind of my responsibility to figure out if I want to be involved, but at the same time, like you would think, you know, if you're a union to represent us, you would think. So like, right now, the only way they like advertise their meeting times, they'll post a blank white piece

> of paper with black text on it on a bulletin board, which there's so papers on a bulletin board, that by the time you notice it, it's probably over anyway.
>
> So, I was like, "Don't you guys send out emails? Don't you have like a Facebook group or something like that?" And they were just kind of like, "This is the way we've always done it." The president of the union there, she's probably like in her mid-to-late sixties. She's probably been working there for years, so it's just been kind of something that turned into just, like uh, it's always been there and nobody asks questions, so it's kind of funny then because we're—the dynamics of our time changing and a bunch of people are suddenly interested cause we kind of got a bad agreement, so like everyone's really interested in them now.

While it is difficult to know if these men are characteristic of union members writ large, their mixed experiences and opinions about the value of unions is a troubling sign for the unions that hope to direct these men's political energy toward the party that is more likely to protect collective bargaining and support organized labor.

Deep Stories

A series of studies have attempted to unpack the fact that many poor and working-class whites support the Republican Party (for one such attempt that includes a review of previous literature, see Prasad et al. 2009), something that has long vexed many in the academy, who view this support as against the self-interest of the working class. One of the most notable such efforts is by Arlie Hochschild, who seized upon her confoundment at the Tea Party to venture into Louisiana in an effort to breech the "empathy wall" and understand a tribe different from her own, a journey she recounts in *Strangers in Their Own Land* (Hochschild 2016). Among her central findings is the discovery of what she calls a "deep story," a narrative that transcends facts to reveal the "*subjective prism*" (2016: 137, emphasis hers) through which her subjects make sense of the world. The deep story for her Tea Party respondents involves waiting in a long line that is being

cut—by "[w]omen, immigrants, refugees, public sector workers" (2016: 137)—all with the help of government, as they then fall further behind. The deep story, according to Hochschild, helps explain how—from the perspective of the liberal left—the animus that these men and women should direct toward Big Oil is instead channeled toward the line cutters, and ultimately, the government enabling them. However, in a less-discussed portion of the book, Hochschild suggests that the liberal left has its own deep story that revolves around the benefits of government in building a public square:

> In it, people stand around a large public square inside of which are creative science museums for kids, public art and theater programs, libraries, schools—a state-of-the-art public infrastructure available for use by all. They are fiercely proud of it. Some of them built it. Outsiders can join those standing around the square, since a lot of people who are insiders now were outsiders in the past; incorporation and acceptance of difference feel like American values represented in the Statue of Liberty. But in the liberal deep story, an alarming event occurs; marauders invade the public square, recklessly dismantle it, and selfishly steal away bricks and concrete chunks from the public buildings at its center. Seeing insult added to injury, those guarding the public square watch helplessly as those who've dismantled it construct private McMansions with the same bricks and pieces of concrete, privatizing the public realm (Hochschild 2016:235-36).

The two deep stories Hochschild identifies turn on whether one sees the state as an actor for good or ill, which reflects the long-running, deep-seated trench warfare between the political right and left in the United States about the size of government (Teles 2013). The antipathy for government among the political right is long-running, and the response of the liberal left has often been to defend the role of government, a tactic typified by the statement of President Obama during the 2012 campaign, "If you've got a business—you didn't build that", which was an attempt to speak to the often taken-for-granted infrastructure and even rule-of-law necessary for any small business to thrive. However, such lines of argument are rarely persuasive, for as we see among the men in this study, government is—at best—a necessary evil. There have been recent attempts to

bridge this divide between the political right and left, including one notable effort by the Niskanen Center (Lindsey et al. 2018), in which both markets and governments are rehabilitated. As the authors of a new Niskanen Center report write, an effort is needed "… that sees government and market not as either-or antagonists, but as necessary complements" (Lindsey et al. 2018: 3).

While any contribution is welcome that seeks common ground in a polarized time, I suggest that most attempts to bridge our political divide fall short because of a failure to take seriously the deep stories of both the conservative right and liberal left. In the remainder of this section, I draw upon James Coleman's work, *The Asymmetric Society* (1982), to offer a way forward in what the Niskanen Center rightly calls "an age of extremes" (Lindsey et al. 2018).

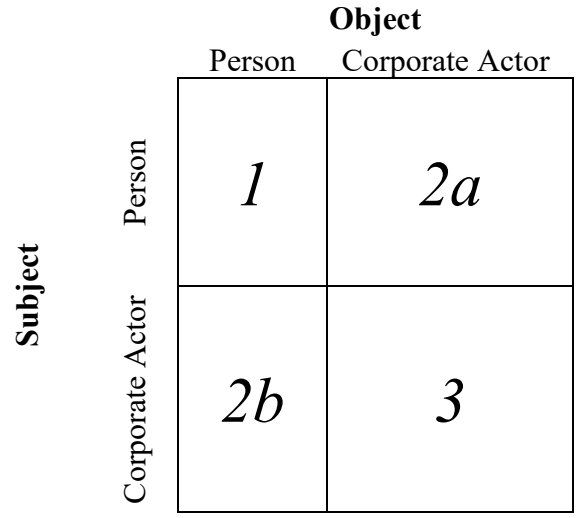
Coleman's Framework

In 1982, sociologist James Coleman wrote a slim and prescient book called *The Asymmetrical Society*. He suggested that society is composed of two kinds of persons: natural persons, individuals like you and me, and corporate actors, which broadly understood are agglomerations of people into entities that are greater than the sum of the natural persons of which they are composed. Corporate actors for Coleman were primarily corporations, entities that had evolved over time to have their own legal rights independent from any single person, like a CEO, or even any group of people, like the Board of Directors or the employees.[80] As seen in Figure 1, these two types of entities—

80 This point is expanded upon in *We, The Corporations* (Winkler 2018).

natural persons and corporate actors—can have three types of interactions: natural person with natural person, corporate actor with corporate actor, and natural person with corporate actor. The first and second types of interaction are worthy of investigation, but Coleman was especially concerned with the last type. He diagnosed something that is all the much clearer now than it was when he wrote, namely that the interaction of a natural person and corporate actor is not a meeting of equals. It is, indeed, the crucial "asymmetry" that defines our asymmetric society.

Figure 6.1: Coleman's Matrix of Object-Subject Interactions



This asymmetry between natural persons and corporate actors is of no small consequence, as corporate actors—by virtue of their size and power—pose great risk to natural persons. In particular, Coleman identifies four types of risk that corporate actors pose to natural persons. First, there is a risk to customers, which Coleman calls an FDA-type risk, where natural persons can be harmed by consuming the product of a corporate

actor since any individual cannot inspect products for their safety. Customers are put at risk if a corporate actor sells contaminated meat, exploding cell phones, or cars with faulty air bags. The second type of risk a corporate actor poses to a natural person is what Coleman calls the OSHA-type risk, namely the risk to employees. A single employee, especially one who wants to keep their job, is at a disadvantage if a corporate actor has that employee working in unsafe conditions or performing unsafe tasks. Third, corporate actors pose a risk to natural persons as neighbors, or what Coleman dubs an EPA-type risk. A corporate actor that pollutes a stream or causes an oil spill creates risk to that corporate actor's neighbors, whether or not those natural persons are customers or employees, yet any of those individual neighbors has little ability to hold the corporate actor accountable not to pollute his or her neighborhood. One need not be a direct customer or even an employee of a corporate actor and still be affected by this type of risk. Finally, corporate actors pose an Agent Orange-type risk, which is a risk more broadly distributed to all citizens.

Not only do corporate actors pose multiple risks to natural persons, Coleman describes why it is exceedingly difficult for natural persons to hold corporate actors accountable for these risks. Corporate actors are larger and more powerful than natural persons, and thus can easily resist them. Further, the differentiation in structure of corporate actors also makes redress by natural persons more difficult, if not impossible. Likewise, the diffusion and deflection of responsibility in a highly differentiated corporate structure makes accountability hard to apply, as was the case after the financial crisis. And finally, the only constraints on the behavior of a corporate actors are external because there is no internalization of norms by corporate actors. The only norm of a

corporate actor is to maximize profits, not to protect natural persons. It might be "good business" not to make one's customers sick or pollute the stream in a town whose compliance a corporate actor needs, but in this sense, any minimization of risk to natural persons is inadvertent. If circumstances changed such that profits could be increased only if risk is also increased, there are no corporate norms to interfere there is when a natural person thinks better. In short, there is no corporate conscience.

Fallacies of the Modern Right and Left

Coleman's analysis of corporate actors is even more poignant today than when it was written, yet his typology—to be fully applicable—is incomplete because he fails to adequately distinguish among different types of corporate actors. Corporate actors for Coleman were primarily corporations, entities that had evolved over time to have their own legal rights independent from any single person or even any group of people (also see Winkler 2018). Coleman acknowledges that corporate actors are not merely corporations, but he does not incorporate this into his schema. On one hand, he writes of the risk governments can pose to natural persons, yet he also speaks of the government's regulatory role in mediating the risks of some corporate actors toward some classes of natural persons. At one point he calls the state "that one large and most powerful corporate actor" (1982:90), yet he fails to disentangle it from for-profit corporations in his risk assessment. Thus, Coleman under-develops the implications for natural persons of the actions of other corporate actors in society, most importantly the state.

If Coleman's primary framework of natural persons and corporate actors is amended to include the state as a corporate actor, it creates a framework within which to

make sense of American politics over the last half century. As mentioned, American politics in recent decades has been a tug-of-war between over the role of government: Statism on the Left and Marketism on the Right. Applying this revision of Coleman's framework to the modern political landscape, I argue that the deep stories of the conservative right and the liberal left each commit a fallacy by only considering the risks of one type of corporate actor. The conservative right is guilty of what I term the Libertarian Fallacy, ignoring or minimizing the risks to natural persons posed by corporations while emphasizing risks posed to natural persons by the state. The liberal left is prey to what I call the Socialist Fallacy, namely emphasizing the risks posed to natural persons by corporations while not taking seriously the risks to natural persons posed by the state. Both positions fail to take seriously the ways in which concentrated power, whether in the form of corporations or the state, can oppress natural persons, especially non-dominant groups. Coleman's frame of seeing relations in terms of corporate actors and natural persons allows us to take the deep story of the right and left seriously, especially each story's critique of power . In doing so, it offers a way forward that does not require convincing the right or the left that their deep story is false.

For those shaped by the deep story of the conservative right, the main concern is state power. As illustrated above, this comes in many forms for the men in this study, including gun control, regulations perceived to hurt industries vital to the local economy, and state encroachment on religious expression, or conversely, state failure to protect the unborn. Further, these men evince a rugged individualism and frontier spirit in which government assistance in the form of social programs is seen as violating norms of self-sufficiency and responsibility for one's family. Support for the party that is at least

rhetorically supportive of small government is consistent with many of these men's deepest values. The liberal left's tact with those on the right is often to either draw out inconsistencies ("Keep your government hands off my Medicare!") or rehabilitate the role of government ("You didn't build that!"), yet this fails to take seriously the ways in which government represents a form of corporate power that even the left should have cause to question. Some risks posed by the state to natural persons are relatively benign, such as the bureaucratic inconvenience of the DMV or the US Postal Service. But other ways in which the state, whether at the local, state, or federal level, abuses its power often draws more concern from the left, such as the Flint water crisis. Indeed, the liberal left has its own inconsistencies in its approach to government. As Hochschild's deep story on the left suggests, the left is comfortable extolling the virtues of public goods in the form of museums and parks, but omitted from this story are the ways the liberal left often critiques the state, such as in its imperialism, militarism, and police brutality, which are all carried out by appendages of the state. There are also the many ways in which social policy, while often well-intended, has worked out to harm the very populations it was meant to assist, the history of housing policy being a prime example.[81] This is not to mention that public goods the left extols might be less visible, viable, or even available in places that are already disadvantaged. In this reading, the deep stories of the right and left are correct but incomplete: the Libertarian and Socialist Fallacies concern the ways in which the right and the left should expand their deep stories to encompass others types of

81 As has been well-documented (Hirsch 2009; Massey and Denton 1993; Rothstein 2017), the state has played an integral role in sustaining, reinforcing, and even deepening social inequality through its housing policy. More broadly, many social policies—even ones that were colorblind on their face—were often implemented in ways that further disadvantaged non-dominant groups, especially African Americans (Coates 2014; Katznelson 2005).

corporate risk. Rather than asking the right and left to nullify each other's deepest concerns, this approach keeps each deep story in tact yet asks each to expand its fundamental concerns to other realm of corporate power.

Mitigating Corporate Risk

While the Coleman framework of seeing the world in terms of corporate actors and natural persons exposes fallacies in the deep stories of the right and left, it also presents the opportunity for a first principle that unites both stories, namely a concern for the liberty of natural persons from coercion of corporate actors. Both the right and the left can agree—in keeping with their deep stories—that the power of corporate actors should be moderated. For the right, the main concern is the state, while for the left, it is corporations. The proper binary, however, is not between the state on one hand and corporations on the other, but between what Jeffrey Stout (2010) terms domination and non-domination. As the deep stories of the right and the left attest, natural persons can be harmed—dominated in Stout's terminology—by any corporate power, whether the state or corporations. Societal relations should be analyzed according to power, and as Coleman notes, natural persons are in an asymmetric relationship with corporate actors. For Stout, the important question is one of accountability; as he writes, "power minus accountability equals domination" (2010: 63). The deep stories of the right and left can be united by setting the liberty of natural persons as a first principle, not the primacy of one type of corporate power over another. In this reformulation, the opposite of tyranny is not liberty but accountability. The left and right can unite around the judgment of any given societal arrangement according to whether natural persons are free from

unreasonable coercion and have recourse to hold corporate actors—whether corporations or the state—accountable in cases of abuse. Perhaps the men in this study would be receptive to voices from the left that recast corporate dominance in terms of the infringement on personal liberty and are mindful of the ways that state power can be seen by some subjects as equally intrusive as that of any corporate actor.

Summary[82]

A constellation of events over the past few years has brought working-class men in rural America out of the shadows and into the national spotlight. The methamphetamine and opioid crises, which have devasted some rural places, have made national headlines. In 2015, work by the economists Ann Case and Angus Deaton broke through to mainstream audiences when they found evidence of an increase in midlife mortality among non-Hispanic, white Americans, which the researchers attributed in part to so-called "deaths of despair": alcohol, drugs, and suicide (Case and Deaton 2015). And of course, the election of Donald Trump has raised the profile of predominantly white, working-class, rural places even higher. Given the increased attention to the white, working class in the wake of the 2016 presidential election and the likelihood this group will be of even greater interest in the lead up to the 2020 election, there is perhaps no better time for scholarly attention to white, working-class men in rural America. This dissertation, based upon life history interviews with 61 working-class men from

82 The first paragraph of the Summary is adapted from "White Poor, Black Poor: Untangling Structure and Culture" (Francis 2017).

northwestern Pennsylvania, seeks to better understand the current state of working-class men in rural America today.

The narrow empirical phenomenon that animated the early stages of this dissertation is the declining labor force participation rate among prime-age, working-class men, which is near its lowest point on record and has generated concern among scholars and policymakers. While virtually all the men in this study were in the labor force at the time of the interview, a closer examination of their lifetime labor force histories finds that most men have experienced at least one period of nonwork. In fact, almost half of the men have had at least one spell outside the labor force of a year or more. The picture that emerges is one of what I term *chronic churning*, a phenomenon in which men leave the labor force for extended periods but almost always return and often persist in formal employment. As to why men make these extended labor force exits to begin with, the qualitative data allow me to set these men's decisions to leave the labor force in context. I find that the four reasons men leave the labor force are 1) to pursue education or training; 2) struggles with substance abuse; 3) the receipt of disability benefits; and 4) what I term *elective nonparticipation*, which are periods of labor force dropout where men elect to leave the labor force for a time. Most elective nonparticipators show a relatively high degree of labor force attachment, and most often return to the formal labor force sooner or later. A final group of men, about ten percent of the total, are who I call *marginal men*, who have tenuous attachments to the labor force over time. These men tend to be younger, unmarried, and childless, thus resembling the popular depiction of nonworking men, although the exact reasons why these men have forsaken formal work vary.

While interest in labor force dropout launched this dissertation, the fact that most men in the study have worked most of time allowed for other avenues of inquiry into the labor force experience of working-class men. While much has been written about the divergence in labor force outcomes between those with and without a college degree, a common refrain from observers and even some scholars questions why men with such poor prospects are not doing more to improve their labor market outcomes. With the benefit of life history interviews, this dissertation can not only examine the steps men have—or have not—taken to improve their prospects, but it can present how men understand the choices they make. The evidence presented in this dissertation shows that men are often doing more to improve their labor market position than outcome-based accounts allow. First, a majority of men in this study have pursued some sort of postsecondary education or training. Second, despite evidence that Americans in general are moving less for work (Austin et al. 2018; Ganong and Shoag 2017), the men in this study often took one of a set of what I call *mobility measures* to improve their labor market opportunities, such as enlisting in the military, taking jobs that require travel, or moving away for brief periods on what I call *prospecting trips* in which men move without a job in search of better opportunities. I also find that men who attempt a *mobility measure* are usually drawn back to the area by several factors, including the "stickiness" of rural place and obligations to custodial and noncustodial children. Finally, I find that while few men have worked nontraditional jobs, many more have considered such jobs and even taken preliminary steps toward such work.

Having a range of cases in this study also allows for internal comparison, such as between those who have "good jobs" that pay at least $15 an hour, and those who don't.

Almost one-third of the men in the study have good jobs, including a dozen men who earn an effective hourly rate of at least $25. For the men in good jobs, I identify three themes among their jobs: they are mostly in traditional, blue-collar occupations and industries; they tend to be unionized; and many of the jobs are professional or managerial. In many cases, it is a combination of these factors that makes a real difference in earnings. But while many men in the study had good jobs, a majority of the men did not. Some of the men once had good jobs but no longer do, while others have never managed to navigate their way into higher-paying work. While some of the men's wages have been perennially low, more common among the men are those whose wages seem to stall between $10 and $15 an hour in what I call bad(ish) jobs. These jobs are not the most poorly paid, but they generally lack opportunities for predictable advancement or assurance of measurable wage gains over time. I identify four dynamics of this low*er*-wage labor market: 1) the job carousel, in which men move laterally among jobs that pay comparably but struggle to find opportunities to advance; 2) chutes and ladders, which describes the fact that there is often not a clear-line path of wage improvement, as almost half of men at one point made more than they currently do; 3) the steel ceiling, the working-class version of the glass ceiling, in which men find their wages stagnating, even after years of service to the same employer; and 4) not management material, the fact that some men desire advancement but are deemed not to be suitable managers by their employers, often compelling men to make lateral moves to other occupations or industries. A final group of men make up what I call the downwardly mobile, which are those with greater earning power who have chosen not to use it or those whose hourly wages are not reflective of their true labor market position.

Given the many changes in working-class work for men who have come of age in the twenty-first century, what has happened to working-class male identity? For the minority of men in secure positions, particularly those with jobs that offer a clear retirement timeline, they think of the future in those terms. Moreover, some men even forego opportunities for promotion at work in favor of maintaining job security, a demonstration that job security, which is elusive, is more prized than prestige or even income. But for those who do not have secure work, which is a majority of the men, they have difficulty thinking and planning for the future, which reflects the insecure nature of their work. In this sense, thinking about the future is a luxury these men are not afforded.

Job insecurity, in turn, affects the relationship of work and identity, causing men to ask both *more* and *less* of work. They ask *more* in the sense that men care about the nature of their work and are less willing to countenance work that is not personally fulfilling or at least tolerable, especially when it does not pay well enough to justify the conditions. But men also ask *less* of work in the sense that many men have deemphasized the role of work in their identities. Rather than identity being centered around "the disciplined self" (Lamont 2000), I find that men have what I call *vocational selves*, in which they find meaning and fulfillment in non-work pursuits. In the face of often meaningless and poorly paid work, men have elevated other aspects of their lives as sources of meaning and satisfaction. Asking both more and less of work are two sides of the same coin: they both imply less commitment and attachment to one's job.

A unique feature of the men in this study, especially in contrast to other recent profiles of the working class, is their contentment, which I attribute to a set of subcultural beliefs and practices grounded in rural masculinity. This identity is deeply connected to

rural place and rooted in working with one's hands, being outdoors for work and leisure, and having autonomy. Rather than "stuck" in rural America (Florida 2019), the men in this study strongly identify with what they see as the virtues of rural life, challenges and all, which provides refuge from the vicissitudes of labor market precarity. Yet while these beliefs provide a sense of contentment, but they also constrain how men approach work. For example, the aversion to working for a boss in supervised, indoor settings limits opportunities; seeing urban spaces as unsafe makes them non-starters for relocation; and masculinity as expressed in practical, hands-on skill can evoke a distrust of higher education or even an anti-intellectual ethos. Construed positively, this sense of rural masculinity provides a meaningful connection to place. Further, one unspoken aspect of this rural rootedness is its whiteness, which offers an unspoken and often unexamined sense of social solidarity.

Finally, any treatment of the white, working-class in 2019 must touch upon the implications for politics. In talking with these men about the 2016 election, which occurred early in the dissertation fieldwork, there was almost universal reluctance about Trump, which stands in contrast to depictions of white, working-class men as "true believers". (It is also noteworthy than half of the men did not vote at all.) In fact, about half of likely voters were conflicted about their vote, although most still ultimately voted for Trump, largely because Hillary Clinton was an even more unacceptable choice. Several men said they would have voted for Bernie Sanders had he been the nominee, and the degree of hesitation about Trump suggests a softness in their support for him that is contingent on how Trump performs. While these findings might give hope to those on the political left who want to build a coalition on a message of economic populism, the

nature of these men's grievances is more in line with what Molyneux (2017) calls political populism, which is a distrust of political—but not economic—elites.

Contributions to Knowledge

This dissertation touches upon of several sociological subfields: the sociology of work; the sociology of gender; poverty, inequality and mobility; and rural sociology. It also addresses two phenomena—the declining labor force participation rate and the election of Donald Trump—that have largely been in the purview of economists and political scientists, respectively. Concerning the sociology of work, this dissertation stands in a long line of work about the working class, offering an updated picture of the labor force experiences of working-class men. This dissertation documents the considerable structural constraints that confront men without a college degree, including a lower-wage labor market that offers few clear-line paths of wage improvement or advancement and a wage ceiling that leaves most men short of a living wage. These constraints result in labor force patterns where men often make lateral moves to other occupations or industries and even churn in and out of the labor force completely. Paired with these structural constraints, there is also a set of subcultural beliefs and practices in this part of the country that shape and constrain how men approach work. This identity is deeply connected to rural place and rooted in working with one's hands, being outdoors for work and leisure, and having autonomy. While these beliefs are adaptive, which is touched upon more below, there are also ways in which they constrain how men approach work. The aversion to working for a boss in supervised, indoor settings; seeing

urban spaces as unsafe; and a distrust of higher education can all limit certain labor market opportunities.

This dissertation also contributes to sociology of gender in its examination of the evolution of working-class masculinity. Perhaps the central finding of the dissertation concerns how these men have responded to the changed world of work by de-centering the role of formal work in their identities through the formation of vocational selves. With work that is neither well-paid nor fulfilling, these men have looked elsewhere for meaning, often to hobbies and sometimes to relationships and community or religious involvements. And in contrast to other recent studies of the working class (Cherlin 2014; Silva 2013), the men in this study display a high degree of contentment with their situations, which is rooted in kind of rural masculinity. Rather than "stuck" in rural America (Florida 2019), the men in this study strongly identify with what they see as the virtues of rural life, challenges and all, which provides refuge from the vicissitudes of labor market precarity. And rather than something to be transcended, they also embrace their working-class identities, even at a time when there are fewer opportunities to actualize this identity in the formal labor market.

Additionally, this dissertation explores how these men approach traditionally female-dominated occupations and industries. While few men have worked in traditionally female-dominated occupations, evidence from this study indicates that men have considered such jobs and have even taken preliminary steps toward them, even if they end up not following through. These findings suggest that we may be closer to a tipping point with some occupations than occupational data suggest. This said, the few men in this study who are in female-dominated occupations testify to some resistance

from family and peers, indicating that certain cultural barriers remain entrenched, perhaps particularly in rural America, where a type of "country boy" masculinity is more pronounced (Campbell et al. 2006). Additionally, given the remaining cultural cost for some men to switch careers and the availability of at least some traditional work that pays well, it may take even more time and decimation of less-skilled, male-dominated occupations to push more men into female-dominated jobs.

This dissertation also contributes to the sociology of poverty, inequality and mobility by examining the social mobility strategies of these men, uncovering misunderstandings about why working-class men adopt—or fail to adopt—the labor force improvement strategies they do. Rather than seeing pursuing additional education or training in purely market-based terms as means to improve their labor market positions, many men use education and training as a way to explore vocational interests at a time of life when many of their college-going peers are doing the same and in a world without a dominant local employer that obviates vocational exploration. Some men do not have the opportunity for such exploration, as life circumstances expedite entry into the labor market or their own choices limit opportunities for vocational exploration. Additionally, these men see education as a means to an end, not an end in itself: pursuit of education is most often to gain a practical skill or trade that can be transferred in an immediate and obvious way to the labor market, something especially true in rural places where formal educational credentials are sometimes less valuable than personal trust and practical knowledge. Further, looking only at out-of-state moves is too limiting when trying to understand the ways in which men use geographic mobility to improve their labor market prospects, such as enlisting in the military and taking jobs that require travel, such as

long-haul truck driving or itinerant work crews. And by examining the men who have managed to do well, this dissertation also contributes to understanding of some of the pathways of mobility that remain. And by centering this work in rural place, this dissertation also contributes to rural sociology, adding to a long history of qualitative studies of the poor and working-class in rural places (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Duncan 1992, 2014; Fitchen 1991, 1995; Sherman 2009). Rural America is not homogenous, but it does face unique challenges when compared with urban and suburban places. As described above, attachment to rural place and a form of rural masculinity each play important roles in the lives of rural, working-class men.

Finally, this dissertation addresses two issues that have largely been studying within other disciplines. The declining labor force participation rate among prime-age men has been the territory of economists, but this dissertation seeks to add to this literature through an exploration of this phenomenon using qualitative methods. While there is evidence of men moving in and out of the labor force in the shorter term (Coglianese 2017), the discovery among these men of chronic churning contributes a unique explanation of what may be contributing to increased rates of nonparticipation in the labor force. The existence of chronic churning also suggests that even long bouts of nonparticipation are not permanent, and men who have such spells outside the labor force have not lost their desire to work. It also challenges the implicit notion that workers and nonworkers are relatively fixed categories that are stable over time and pushes back against analyses that have reified these survey categorizations of "worker" and "nonworker" into *de facto* social classes with qualitative commonalties. And although policy and politics was not part of the original research design, the serendipity of being in

the field before and after the 2016 election thrust the election of Donald Trump onto the study. Many studies from political scientists and some sociologists have sought to understand votes for Trump. Many analyses start with the election choice—a vote for Trump—and then correlate it with surveys of racial and economic attitudes. This dissertation, by asking men who they voted for and why, allows men to craft their own narratives about their vote. The finding of reluctant support for Trump is meaningful for at least two reasons. First, it opens the possibility that some white, working-class people—including some Trump voters—are within reach for those who hold out any hope of building interracial coalitions of poor and working-class people. Second, it creates a counter-narrative to the popular sentiments that all white, working-class people voted for Trump, and they did so out of racial animus. In a recent opinion piece in *The New York Times*, Kentucky-based writer Robert Gipe writes, "Sexism and racism have played a significant role in the voting habits of some of my neighbors. So has anger. So have conservative religious beliefs. But that isn't just in Appalachia. That's what's happened in America" (Gipe 2019).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, conducting the project in an area that is virtually all white precludes the data from speaking to the situation of working-class African Americans and other racial and ethnic groups who have faced well-documented barriers to employment that even disadvantaged whites have not faced. This may limit the applicability of the conclusions to all working-class men, but it opens the door for other studies that examine the labor force experience of men of other racial and ethnic

backgrounds in rural place and beyond. Further, the lack of a comparison site for this study—whether urban, suburban, or another rural location—makes certain types of inference difficult. The decision to focus on rural America was born of the interests of the researcher and the time and resource expenditures involved in a multi-site project. It is my hope that other scholars will pursue these questions in other locations or across multiple sites to provide studies against which this study can be evaluated. Next, by only talking with men, there is a risk of getting one side of the conversation when it comes to family and household matters.[83] Men might be inclined to favor their version of events, while partners and spouses might have differing opinions. (Partners and spouses were present for a few interviews, but nothing close to a majority.) Future stages of this project might include the involvement of partners and spouses. Finally, only including workers and not employers might limit the perspectives of the local labor market. To understand the employment situation of the region, the pilot study proposed the inclusion of a small number of interviews with local employers in businesses or industries likely to hire men with less than a college degree. Interviews with five employers were conducted, and employers were asked about the types of positions in their business, hiring practices, the availability of qualified candidates, retention of employees, and other challenges of maintaining a workforce. Data from those interviews largely confirmed common wisdom among employers, namely that good workers are hard to find and that issues with

83 One version of this project proposed following-up with all men at least six months after the initial interviews and then conducting full interviews with any men who had a change in employment status since the initial interview. These follow-ups were to include any partner or spouse to remedy the limitation of only having one side of the household story. Due to the accelerated timeline of the project, this phase was not conducted before completion of the dissertation. However, it still could be pursued in a future stage of the project.

nonwork are due to characteristics of men themselves, not employers or the labor market. Understanding the relational nature of any potentially exploitative arrangement is important (Desmond 2016), and future work about the working-class should consider the often hidden role of employers.

This dissertation sheds light on one corner of the twenty-first century labor force, that of rural, white, working-class men. Given the changing nature of working-class work and the likelihood of even greater disruption of the working classes due to automation and other forces, understanding the labor force choices of working-class men is imperative for the future of workers and the nation. By presenting these men's understandings and experiences of work, this dissertation hopefully moves us closer to finding ways to support all poor and working-class people.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

Background and Neighborhood

1. Tell me the story of your life.

2. Tell me about your family. (Get ages of all family members.)

3. Who all lives here?
    a. Let's start with the adults. (If extra adults not mentioned above, get ages and relationship to respondent.)
    b. How about the kids? (If extra kids not mentioned above, get ages and relationship to respondent.)
    c. What about people who live here part of the time, not all of the time? (If part time residents not mentioned above, get ages. Probe as to how often and for what duration.)

4. What was it like for you growing up?

5. Tell me about your parents' educational background. (Probe for highest level of schooling completed.) Tell me about how they made a living? (Probe for mother's job and father's job while respondent was living at home.)

6. How would you describe your standard of living while growing up?

7. Tell me the whole story of how you came to live in this area.

8. How would you describe this area to a family that was thinking about moving here?

Current Situation

9. Tell me all about your situation right now. (Probe for work status, type, hours, and/or whether in school and what kind of program.)

10. Walk me through a typical day for you. (Probe for times waking, eating, sleeping, traveling, working, etc. Ask about routines and how they vary.)

11. What about the situation of the other adults in the house? (Probe for work status, type, hours, and/or whether in school and what kind of program.)

12. What about the situation of the kids? (Probe for whether in school, what grade, whether working, how they arrange childcare, where the kids are in care, other family members who help out.)

Work History and Labor Force Participation

13. Now I'd like to talk in more detail about your work history. What was your first job? (Probe for how they got the job, wage rate, hours, benefits, duties, bosses, job tenure, reason for leaving, satisfaction with the job. Continue to next job until every job has been covered.)

14. Are you currently working? (If yes, use probes for #13 about the current job. If not, ask the probes below.)
    a. Do you currently want a job, either full or part time?
    b. Have you been doing anything to find work during the last 4 weeks? (If so, what are all of the things you have done to find work during the last 4 weeks? If not, what is the main reason you have not been looking for work?)
    c. Last week, could you have started a job if one had been offered?

15. Have you ever had periods in the past when you were not working? What were the reasons why you were not working? How did you support yourself during that time?

16. Have you made money in any ways we haven't discussed? (Probe for off-the-books work, odds jobs, etc.)

17. How does your job compare with your friends' jobs?

18. Have your jobs matched your skills and experience? What other kinds of jobs do you think you could get with your skills and experience?

19. What would be your ideal job? (Probe for schedule, wages, working conditions, type of work.)

20. Are there any jobs around here you would not do, even if one was offered to you? What if it paid really well?

Household Finances

21. What are your main expenses in a typical month? (Probe for housing, utilities, transportation, food, schooling and child care, phone/cable/internet, medical, alcohol/cigarettes, special occasions.)

22. How did you spend your last paycheck? (Probe for expenditures in detail, trying to nail down what the money was spent for, when it was spent, and why it was spent in that way.)

23. Tell me about your other sources of income. (Probe for income from informal jobs, and transfer programs.)

24. Do you pay child support? How much? Is this by court order?

25. What about your partner? Tell me a little bit about the jobs she has right now. (Probe more in depth for wage rates, hours, benefits, duties and job tenure.) Tell me about any other jobs they've had in the past few years. (Probe in depth for wage rate, hours, benefits, duties, and job tenure).

26. What about other adults in the household? How much do they earn? How much to they contribute to the household expenses each month?

27. What about anyone outside the household that helps you out financially on a regular basis? Do you have to pay them back? (Who, how much, how often?)

28. Do you receive any government programs or benefits? What about the others in the household? Are there any government programs that you could apply to for assistance, but don't?

29. How do you bridge the gap when you have more expenses than income?

The Future

30. What do you think your situation will be like 5 years from now? What about 10 years? (Probe for expectations for asset accumulation, adult work and school status, and for child work and school status. If kids are projected to go to college, probe for how respondent plans to pay for it).

31. If you had to give advice to yourself when you were 16, what would you say?

32. If the president were to ask your advice on how to improve job opportunities, what would you tell him?

33. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

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VITA

Robert Donald Francis—named for his two grandfathers—was born in Oil City, Pennsylvania in 1977. His father graduated high school, served active duty with the Marines in Vietnam, and worked a series of blue-collar jobs, mostly in the oil and gas industry. His mother, educated at a rural teacher's college, was an elementary school teacher. Robert was raised in Pleasantville, Pennsylvania (2010 population: 892) and attended nearby Titusville High School, a six-mile drive into the valley. He was the valedictorian of the THS Class of 1995.

Robert studied at Wheaton College (IL), graduating *magna cum laude* in 1999 with a double major in Sociology and Theological Studies. Robert spent the next several years in Chicago, first as a junior high and high school teacher at Gospel Outreach Christian School and later as a case manager for Asian Human Services. He also volunteered with World Relief Chicago and worked as a weekend manager at The Inspiration Café, a nationally recognized provider of homelessness services. Robert spent from November 2002 to October 2003 working at a Christian youth hostel in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. He has also worked in construction, at a dairy, as a temp, and as a server in a restaurant selling Chicago-style pizza.

Unsure what to do with his life, Robert returned to school in 2005, earning a Master of Social Science degree from the University of Chicago in 2006. Robert's thesis—advised by Omar McRoberts—concerned the Emerging Church Movement (ECM). Upon graduation, Robert pivoted from Chicago to Washington, DC. He spent one year as the Organizing and Policy Fellow at Sojourners, followed by three years as the Director for Domestic Policy at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Washington Office and three more years as the Director of Advocacy for Lutheran Services in America.

In 2014, Robert began his doctoral work in Sociology at Johns Hopkins University. He worked as a research assistant to Kathryn Edin for six of his first seven semesters, assisting with projects about extreme poverty, child support, and TANF. While a graduate student, Robert's solo-authored work has appeared in *Socius*, *Teaching Sociology*, *The Sociologist*, *Activist History Review*, *Public Justice Review*, and the *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry*. Additionally, he is fourth author on pieces in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* and the *Journal of Family Theory and Review*.

Robert was selected as a University of Pennsylvania Summer Institute on Inequality Pre-Dissertation Fellow in 2015 and was recently named a 2018-19 Annie E. Casey Foundation Rural Poverty Research Fellow. He currently serves as Chair of the Rural Poverty Research & Interest Group for the Rural Sociological Society (RSS); Student Liaison to the Executive Committee of the District of Columbia Sociological Society (DCSS); and member of the American Sociological Association's Task Force on First-Generation and Working-Class People in Sociology. His research has been awarded by RSS, DCSS, and the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM).

During his gradate career, Robert taught five Intersession courses at Johns Hopkins and was an Adjunct Faculty Member for three semesters at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia. Beginning in the Fall of 2019, he will be an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington.